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野徹夜

【キミハツキヨニ

ヒカリカガヤク】

君は月夜に
光り輝く

kimi wa tsukiyon ni hikarikagayaku



YOU SHINE IN THE MOONLIT NIGHT

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CHAPTER 1:

SHORT SEASON, COLD FEELING^[1]

There were cherry blossoms blooming on both sides of the road on the hill. As I finished climbing it, a brand new hospital came into view. It was a new and relatively clean building, and it somehow didn't feel like people lived here. Despite being a hospital, it had an office-building-like air to it. That made me feel a little more at ease. I informed the reception desk of my business here and was quickly told which room to go to.

Thinking about how I would soon be meeting a complete stranger, I felt quite nervous. Not to mention the fact that this person was a girl who had been hospitalized due to illness.

I was a little restless as I waited for the hospital's elevator.

“I heard she’s a real beauty,” someone had told me.

Apparently, her name was Watarase Mamizu.

During the first homeroom of my first year in high school, Yoshie-sensei, our homeroom teacher, spoke in a well-carrying voice.

“Watarase Mamizu-san has been hospitalized since middle school due to a serious illness,” she said. “I hope that she will be discharged as soon as possible and enjoy her school life with everyone.”

There was one empty seat in the classroom. Our school was a private combined middle and high school, so the students attending didn’t really change from middle school. Even so, it seemed that almost nobody knew Watarase Mamizu.

“I heard that it’s luminescence disease.”

“Then she probably won’t be able to come to school, huh.”

“Who is she?”

“Apparently she hasn’t been to school since May in our first year of middle school.”

“I don’t remember her at all.”

“Doesn’t anyone have a picture of her on their phone?”

The people in the class began gossiping about her a little, but there wasn’t any significant information about her, so that quickly stopped.

If it was luminescence disease, it would be difficult for her to return to school. It was known to be an incurable disease.

Its cause is unknown. Treatment methods haven’t even been established.

A full recovery is impossible. That's why most people with the condition spend their entire lives in hospital. The disease progresses as the patient grows to adulthood, and the symptoms just suddenly appear one day. It's said that most patients develop symptoms in their teenage years or in their twenties. Once the symptoms appear, the mortality rate is high; most patients die before becoming adults. There are many different symptoms, but the characteristic one is the strange phenomenon in the skin.

It glows.

It's said that at night, when the light of the moon shines on the body of someone with the condition, it emits a faint, fluorescent light. Apparently, that emitted light becomes stronger as the condition progresses. That's why it's called luminescence disease.

... Either way, it's unlikely that this girl named Watarase Mamizu will come to the classroom, I thought, and decided to quickly forget about all of it.

A few days after that, during break time, what appeared to be an enormous piece of colored paper was passed around to me.

“Okada, write something in here,” said the person who’d given it to me.

“What is this?” I asked.

“You know, what was it again? Something-san, the one with luminescence disease. Everyone’s supposed to sign it and then it’s going to be given to her.”

Uninterested, I ran my pen across the colored paper.

I hope your illness gets better soon. Okada Takuya.

I wrote these words smoothly within three seconds and then looked around to pass the signed paper to the next person.

“Wow, Okada, that’s pretty vague.”

“Who am I supposed to pass it to next?”

“Everyone around here’s signed it. Ah, Kayama hasn’t yet, I think. Go and give it to him. You and Kayama are close, aren’t you?”

“We’re not really close,” I replied before approaching Kayama’s seat.

Kayama Akira was untidy as usual. His uniform shirt was hanging out from his trousers, and he was slumped forward in his seat, sleeping like a log. He was tall, and his hair was long. He didn’t give off the air of a delinquent. He didn’t have any violent tendencies, but he could be suitably described as “unserious.” He was still popular with girls because he had a well-featured face, but he usually responded to people somewhat arrogantly, so most of the guys avoided him a little.

“Kayama, wake up,” I said.

“To think that I would be selected as manager of a women’s dormitory full of beautiful women...”

Kayama was talking in his sleep. Apparently, he was having a very convenient dream. Persistent, I shook him, returning him to reality.

“Huh? Okada? What is it?” he asked.

I didn't really want to approach him if I had the choice. But that wasn't because of anything to do with me not being able to deal with his irregular personality.

In the past, Kayama did something like a favor for me. That's why it wasn't quite correct to say that we were friends. The word "savior" was appropriate to describe what Kayama was to me.

There was something strange about me when I interacted with Kayama – I felt nervous somewhere inside, even when we were just chatting.

"It's a joint letter," I said. "You know, for the one with luminescence disease."

"Ah." Kayama took the colored paper, and then stared at it with vacant eyes. "Watarase Mamizu, huh."

Something about his tone and expression seemed like he was remembering something in the past.

"Do you know her?" I asked him, surprised.

"No... In the past, a little. So, she's called Watarase now," Kayama said absentmindedly, as if talking to himself. "Well, I'll sign it."

Having been told this, I went to return to my seat.

"Okada, how has it been lately?" Kayama asked me over his shoulder.

"How has what been?"

"Are you alright?"

“I’m alright,” I replied, suppressing my irritation.

“You suffer from time to time,” Kayama said in a tone that sounded as if he’d seen through me.

“I’m normal,” I said. *It’s none of your business*, I thought, but I didn’t say this out loud.

“The joint letter that everyone signed recently has been finished, so I was thinking of having someone take it to her on the next day off. I’m sure that Watarase-san would be much happier if a student were to take it rather than me. Would anyone like to go?” asked Yoshie-sensei.

Yoshie-sensei was a relatively pretty woman in her early twenties, but maybe because she hadn’t been a teacher for long, the way she carried out homeroom was still somewhat stiff.

Even after being told all of this, nobody thought anything other than, “How bothersome.” Nobody raised their hand. Everyone had expected this. With that being the case, Yoshie-sensei would soon designate someone for the task. Everyone covered their faces, not even trying to hide the fact that they were hoping that they wouldn’t be chosen.

And then, suddenly, Kayama raised his hand. Everyone was surprised and turned towards him simultaneously.

“I’ll go,” he said.

“Ah, well then, sorry about this, but I suppose I can leave it to you,” said Yoshie-sensei.

At that moment, there was a trace of something mysterious in Kayama’s expression. There was something resembling grim courage. It was hard to imagine that he’d been happy to volunteer.

... If he really dislikes it that much, he shouldn’t have said anything. Why did Kayama say that he’d go? I thought, a little curious.

The weekend came, and on Sunday, Kayama suddenly called me and asked me to meet him.

“I have a favor to ask,” he said.

We weren’t close enough to make a habit of meeting each other on free days, so this could have been considered a fairly irregular event.

It was a pain, but I headed to his house as I was told.

“I’ve caught a cold,” said Kayama, who had come to the front door in pajamas, wearing a surgical mask. “I have a bit of a fever, you see.”

But he didn’t look like he had a fever at all. It was as if he was showing me a cosplay of a sick person.

“So, what’s the favor?” I asked, a little irritated.

“Ah, so... I can’t go to visit Watarase Mamizu,” Kayama said.

“And you’re asking me to go in your place?” I asked, confirming the situation.

“Yeah,” Kayama replied briefly.

He went back into his house, and after a while, he returned with a complete set of printouts and whatever else that needed to be given to Watarase-san.

“I’ll leave it to you,” he said as he pushed them towards me.

As if declining any further conversation, Kayama withdrew into his house.

Honestly, I couldn’t believe any of this.

PART 2

And so, on Sunday, I was forced to visit a girl I didn’t know.

The hospital that Watarase Mamizu was staying in was at the last train station. After being shaken around for about thirty minutes inside the train that traveled in the opposite direction from the one I usually took to school, I finally reached the station that was my destination.

I headed from the station to the hospital, and then towards the fourth floor via the elevator as I'd been told at the reception desk. I walked down the linoleum-covered corridor and reached the door to a hospital room.

I went inside to find a shared room. The patients inside were all female; other than the two elderly women, there was a young girl who was reading a book. She was probably Watarase Mamizu. I slowly approached her. As if noticing my presence, she removed her gaze from her book and looked up.

I was startled by that single glance.

She was indeed a beautiful girl.

She was beautiful, but I couldn't think of anyone that she resembled. She had a piercing look in her deep-black eyes, which were bordered by naturally long eyelashes and elegant double-edged eyelids, making them look more impressive. And her skin was unbelievably white. Perhaps because of this skin, which looked as if it had never been touched by the sun at all, the atmosphere around her was completely different from the other girls in our class. It was as if she had been born and raised in another country.

A beautiful nose-bridge, shapely cheeks and small lips, running alongside each other. A slender, extended back and a balanced figure. Glossy hair that fell across her chest.

There was nothing dishonest-looking about her expression; she seemed very direct.

“Watarase-san?” I called out to her timidly.

“That's right,” she said. “And you are?”

“Okada Takuya. Starting this spring, I’m your classmate,” I said, briefly introducing myself.

“I see. Nice to meet you, I’m Watarase Mamizu. Say, Takuya-kun, I have something to ask of you,” she said, suddenly calling me by my given name. “I want you to use my given name and call me Mamizu.”

I wasn’t used to calling people by their first names, so I found her request strange. “Why?” I asked.

“Because surnames are things that can quickly change,” she said.

Were her parents divorced? But I was hesitant to suddenly touch on this topic.

“Then I suppose I’ll call you Mamizu.”

“Thank you. I like being called by my given name,” she said, giving a bashful smile. The moment she did, her white teeth became visible as if peeking out of her mouth. I was a little surprised at how white they were. The way she said the word “like” was somehow friendly. “So, Takuya-kun, why have you come here today?”

“Ah. Apparently, I have some printouts and stuff to give you, and a joint letter as well. Sensei said that you’d probably be happier if one of the students gave it to you,” I said.

“I’m happy, I’m happy.”

I handed Mamizu an envelope. She took the colored joint letter out of the envelope and started gazing at it with interest.

“Isn’t your message a bit cold, Takuya-kun?” she asked.

I hastily took a peek at the joint letter. The message that I’d written was in the corner of the colored paper.

I hope your illness gets better soon. Okada Takuya.

“Is it? No...”

I didn’t think that it was really that terrible a message. But it was definitely too short, and perhaps the vagueness due to it having been written in three seconds was visible. And this probably meant that Mamizu wasn’t stupid enough to not see through it.

“Maybe it is. Sorry.” I stopped trying to dodge the issue and apologized earnestly.

Mamizu looked at me with a slightly surprised expression. “I don’t really think it’s so cold that you need to apologize,” she said.

She has a strange way of speaking, I thought.

“Takuya-kun, could it be that you actually didn’t want to come?” she asked.
“Maybe the teacher forced you to?”

I felt like it would be insensitive to be truthful and say, “Actually, Kayama was supposed to come.” I remembered the phrase, “Circumstances may justify a lie.”

“No,” I said. “I came here of my own will.”

“Really? That’s good,” Mamizu said, looking truly relieved.

She seems smart, but she's the type who expresses her emotions in a way that they're easily understood, I thought.

“What is this?” I asked, wanting to change the topic.

A glass sphere that looked like a crystal had been placed on the bedside table. Looking closely, I could see that there was a miniature house inside it. It was a western-style log house. The light trickling through its windows made it look like someone was living inside it.

“Ah, it's called a snow globe. I really like that. Give it here,” Mamizu said, letting go of the colored paper and extending her palm towards me, so I handed it to her. “Look. There's snow here.”

I looked and saw that the ground surface around the house inside the glass sphere was covered in something like confetti that imitated snow.

“I see,” I said.

“That's not all. If I shake it like this...” Mamizu shook the snow globe. As she did, the confetti inside the glass suddenly began to dance. Through some trick, the confetti scattered around and fell slowly. “What do you think? It's like snow, isn't it?”

Indeed, it was like snow.

“My father bought it for me in the past... I can't meet my father anymore, though. That's why I treasure this,” Mamizu said.

So, her parents are divorced after all? I thought, but I couldn't ask her.

“I look at it and imagine,” Mamizu continued. “I imagine that I’m living in a snowy country, and when it becomes winter, it snows. My breath is always white. I spend my time reading books while staying warm by the fireplace. I enjoy imagining that.”

Snow continued to fall inside the glass sphere.

Mamizu continued talking. Could it be that she had been hungry for someone to talk to? The way she spoke made this thought occur to me. But I didn’t really dislike it. The conversation wasn’t that boring, and I didn’t dislike the way she talked.

The conversation finally stopped when it became evening. I decided that it was time to go home.

“Say, Takuya-kun,” Mamizu said as I was leaving. “Will you come to play again soon?”

I was bewildered. But looking at her lonely-looking expression, I couldn’t say, “No, I don’t have any intentions of ever coming back.”

“Soon.”

I gave her that vague reply instead.

“And I have a request,” Mamizu said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I want to eat Almond Crush Pocky,” she said, looking a little embarrassed.

“Pocky?”

“Actually, I’m supposed to eat only hospital food. And my mother is a strict person, so she won’t buy it for me even if I ask. They don’t sell it at the store in the hospital. I don’t have anyone else to ask.” Mamizu looked at me with slightly upturned eyes. “Is it too much to ask?”

“Mmm, well, alright,” I replied without thinking about it too deeply, and then I left the room.

PART 3

“How was she? Watarase Mamizu.”

After school the next day, Kayama and I were eating ice cream in front of the convenience store on the way home when he suddenly asked me this question. He’d paid for mine, as if in reward for what I’d done. I absentmindedly recalled the previous day’s events as I moved the ice cream to my mouth.

“Well, she really was beautiful,” I replied, thinking that this wasn’t really what Kayama was asking about.

“How is her illness?” Kayama asked.

“Who knows?” I said, even as I questioned whether it was alright to say something like this. “Kayama, do you know her?”

“In the past, a little,” Kayama said ambiguously.

“Come to think of it, are her parents divorced?” I asked, as I was a little curious about it.

“Yeah, probably,” Kayama said. “Her surname was Fukami before.”

We couldn’t just eat ice cream forever, so after that, we moved to the station and got on the train.

There was only one empty seat, so I sat down. Kayama dangled from a handle and sluggishly gazed outside the window.

“I have one more favor to ask,” he said.

Outside the window, the green of the trees and the residential areas streamed past.

“Can you meet her one more time?”

“Huh?”

“Ask her when her illness is going to get better.”

What is this guy saying? I wondered. I was already confused when he asked me to go back to that hospital room, but now I had no idea what he was thinking.

“Ask her yourself,” I said, a little fed up.

During this conversation, the train arrived at Kayama’s stop.

“And don’t mention me to Watarase Mamizu.” With those last words, Kayama stepped off the train and left without turning back.

“Oi, wait. What on earth is this about?” I shouted at his back.

In the next moment, the doors closed with a hiss resembling carbon dioxide being released from a drink and the train began moving.

... As usual, I couldn't really tell what he was thinking.

There was still some time until my station. I was strangely sleepy. I closed my eyes and rested my body's weight against the back of the seat, and before long, I lost consciousness.

When I came to, the train had arrived at the final station. The signboards of untrendy-looking cafés and privately-managed bookstores lined the station, and in front of it, there was a quiet scene befitting the terminal station of a provincial city, with the green colors of the half-pruned roadside trees. And then I immediately remembered.

This was the station where Watarase Mamizu's hospital was.

It was seven stations away from the station closest to my house. I had ridden the train way too far. A voice announced, “This train is now returning.” As if being chased out by this announcement, I stepped out onto the platform to see that there was a store at this station. The rows of Pocky at the front of the store caught my eye. The Almond Crush that Mamizu had mentioned was there, too. Before I knew it, I was calling out to the old lady working at the store and asking her for one. I placed the product that was handed to me into my bag and headed for the ticket gate.

Well, since I've come all the way here, I suppose I can at least take some Pocky over there, I thought.

When I went to the hospital room, Watarase Mamizu wasn't there.

Her bed was vacant.

"Watarase Mamizu has gone for an inspection," someone said.

I hastily turned towards where the voice had come from to see a kind-looking elderly woman staying in the same hospital room speaking to me.

She didn't know when Mamizu would come back, but since I'd come all the way here, I decided to wait a little.

The snow globe was on the bedside table.

I took it in my hand and shook it, imitating the way Mamizu had done yesterday.

Snow fell inside the snow globe. Feeling like there was some kind of secret hidden in the snow globe, I gazed at it for a while. Of course, no matter how long I looked at it, nothing about it changed.

I tried continuously shaking the snow globe like crazy. There was a blizzard inside it. Getting carried away, I shook it violently, multiple times.

In the next moment, my hand slipped.

The snow globe slid out of my hand and fell. It dropped vertically and crashed onto the hospital room floor.

Smash!

A harsh sound echoed out.

Now I've gone and done it, I thought hopelessly.

“Oh, it’s you, Takuya-kun.”

Mamizu’s voice came from behind me, and I turned around in surprise.

It was the worst timing.

“Ah.”

A little late, she noticed the glass fragments at my feet. The ruins of the snow globe, broken to pieces and scattered across the floor. I could clearly see her expression clouding over.

“Are you alright? Takuya-kun, are you hurt?” she asked as she rushed over, looking upset.

“I’m alright, but… I’m really sorry,” I said. I didn’t know what more to say.

Mamizu extended a hand towards the glass fragments.

“Ouch!” she gasped.

It seemed that she’d cut her finger. A few moments later, a red liquid forced its way through her skin and flowed out.

“Calm down,” I said hastily. “I’ll go and bring you a band-aid now. I’m going to clean this up, so stay in your bed.”

Mamizu crawled wordlessly onto her bed and sat with her back leaning against the wall.

I brought a band-aid from the nurse station and handed it to Mamizu. And then I silently gathered the glass fragments.

After cleaning up most of the mess, I went to throw the glass into the rubbish bin outside the hospital room.

When I returned, Mamizu was gazing expressionlessly at the contents of the snow globe. She was holding the snow globe, of which only the base and the miniature log house remained, upon which snow no longer fell.

“It can’t be helped. Everything that has a form eventually breaks... it’s just like how there’s no such thing as a creature that doesn’t die.” She placed the object in her hand onto the bedside table. “Maybe it’s better that it broke,” she said.

Her voice somehow sounded like she was suppressing her emotions.

“Why would you say that?” I asked, despite being the one who had broken the snow globe.

“Because I feel like I’ll be able to die feeling more relieved if I don’t have anything that’s important to me,” she said. That was the strange answer she gave me. “Say, Takuya-kun, how much longer do I look like I have to live?”

Even if she asked me that, I had no way of knowing. Honestly speaking, I hadn’t really heard of any cases of people with luminescence disease living long lives. But at least in appearance, she didn’t seem at all like a person with an incurable disease.

“I don’t know,” I replied, giving up on thinking about it.

“My remaining life expectancy is zero,” Mamizu said. Her voice was completely neutral. “I’m like a ghost. Around this time last year, I was told that I have a year left, and a year passed as normal... I’m actually supposed to be dead already. Despite that, I’m quite healthy. I wonder what that’s all about?”

The way she spoke was as if she was talking about someone else.

Why is she saying this to me, someone she’s only just met? I wondered.

“I wonder when I’m going to die?” she said in a strangely bright tone.

At that moment, I felt agitated somewhere in my chest.

I didn’t really know why I felt so discomposed. *What is this emotion?* I wondered. Even after thinking about it, I couldn’t understand what it was.

Even after returning home, I was still thinking about Watarase Mamizu. I lay down in the corner of the living room, in front of the butsudan, and continued thinking.^[2]

I didn’t understand. I didn’t understand what she was thinking inside. No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn’t even make a guess.

She was still a teenager.

Most humans feel despair when they are going to die. They become pessimistic. They feel helplessly sad. And then they accept their fate and are tormented by a sense of powerlessness. They become almost senile. I even got the feeling that it was like this when my grandfather passed the age of eighty and died.

But the way Mamizu had spoken sounded to me as if she was looking forward to dying.

Why is that? I wondered.

And then, because I kind of felt like it, I lit some incense and rang that bowl-like object made of a metal whose name I didn't know.

In front of the butsudan, there was of a portrait of my older sister, smiling in a sailor uniform.

Okada Meiko. Fifteen years old at the time of her death.

My older sister who was hit by a car and died when I was in my first year of middle school.

Now that I thought about it, I'd become a freshman in high school, just like Meiko had been, without even realizing it.

What was it like when Meiko died?

At the end, what did she think?

I suddenly thought about these things.

Hey, Meiko.

I met a person called Watarase Mamizu. She looks delicate, but it's like she isn't scared of dying at all.

But you know. Still.

What was it like for you, Meiko? I asked her silently, but there was no response from my older sister in the photograph. That was to be expected, though.

It became time to sleep, and though I crawled into the bed in my room, I couldn't sleep very well that night. For some reason, Watarase Mamizu's face surfaced in my mind and wouldn't disappear.

‘I wonder when I’m going to die?’

Her voice was still inside my brain. Like a line in a song that I liked or one of those strange commercial songs that became stuck in my head, her voice repeated itself endlessly.

The next day, when I arrived at school and opened my bag, a box of Almond Crush Pocky emerged from it.

What do I do with this? I thought.

Since those events had happened, I’d missed my chance to give it to Mamizu.

After thinking and worrying about it, I decided to go to that hospital room one more time on the way back from school, just for the purpose of giving it to her.

I even considered how I'd get there.

I thought about how I might be causing trouble by visiting a hospital room day after day in succession, and about how Mamizu might not want to ever see my face again after I'd broken something so precious to her.

Now that I thought about it, it was awkward. It would have been better if she'd been angry with me that time. I would have felt better if she'd just snapped and let her anger out at me. I felt an unpleasant pain in my gut.

Why was I trying to get involved with her, to the point of having to experience these feelings?

Even I found it strange. *I wonder why I'm doing this*, I thought.

That was probably... I'm sure it was because she was similar to my older sister Meiko.

It wasn't really that their faces were similar. Their personalities were quite different, too. But although I couldn't really put it into words, there was something similar about them. The closest way to describe it was that the atmosphere around them was similar. Back then, Meiko had been similar to Watarase Mamizu.

There was something that I had never understood about my sister's death.

I had the feeling that maybe I'd be able to understand it if I spent time with Mamizu.

I stopped in front of the room and took a single, deep breath. I inhaled deeply and exhaled thoroughly.

And then I finally hardened my resolve and entered.

Just like the first time I'd come here, Watarase Mamizu was at the bed furthest inside this shared room. I saw that she was facing a notebook and writing something. It was a brand new B5 notebook. It was spread open on the hospital table that had long, thin rollers attached to it, and she was single-mindedly writing something in it. Having a sideways view of her serious face, it was hard to call out to her. I hesitated for a moment. And then, as if detecting my presence, she noticed that I was there and looked up.

“If you’re here, you should have said something,” she said. She was looking at me with a curious-looking expression.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

She looked normal. The feeling I felt yesterday when we'd parted, the dangerous sense that she would break if she were touched, was gone. Despite that, no, perhaps because of it, I felt some kind of distance between us.

“It’s a secret.” She lifted the notebook so that the spine was facing me, as if to hide its contents.

“Alright,” I said.

Well, it was probably a diary or something. I didn't pursue the subject, and gently placed the Pocky that I'd brought onto the table.

"Wow, it's Almond Crush!" Mamizu picked up the Pocky with bright eyes. "Can I eat it?" she asked me. As I nodded, she opened the packaging neatly and bit into one of the Pocky sticks with a small crunch. "It's quite different from the normal ones," she said.

I wondered what she was so happy about as she smiled cheerfully.

"I'll tell you a little," she said.

For a moment, I didn't know what she was talking about, but quickly realized that she was meant the notebook.

"I'm making a list of the things that I want to do before I die."

That's... something I've heard somewhere before. Before you die, you look back on your life and in the end, you finish the things you've left undone and fulfil your desires. It's a common story, I thought. Things like emotional reunions, or wanting to meet famous people.

"During my test yesterday, I asked the doctor, you know. 'Just how much longer do I have to live?' And then he made a difficult expression and said something like, 'I don't really know, but it seems that you'll last another half a year.' A useless doctor, isn't he? I wonder what he thinks human lives are? Anyway, I thought that I might as well use the precious time that I have left in the most worthwhile way possible." Mamizu said all of this in one go, and then, in the next moment, she frowned a little. "But you know, I think it's impossible after all."

“Why?” I asked.

“I can’t go outside. My condition is quite bad, you see. I’ve been strictly told that I’m prohibited from leaving.”

At that moment, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

It wasn’t an admirable thought at all.

I just wanted to know.

What was written in that notebook?

For some reason, I was really curious.

What did Watarase Mamizu want to do before she died?

“Will you let me help you with that?” I suddenly blurted out.

Mamizu looked back at me, surprised. “Why?”

“I want you to let me make it up to you. For breaking the snow globe. I know I did something that can’t be undone. But I feel like the word ‘sorry’ isn’t enough. I feel like it’s too flimsy. I don’t know how to say it properly, but... whatever it is, I’ll do anything if it’s something that I can do.”

“I wonder if that’s true.” After a short silence, Mamizu opened her mouth again. “Will you really do anything?”

The pitch of her voice had gone up half a step. She was speaking as if she was testing me.

“Definitely. I promise,” I said energetically.

“Ah,” she said. She stared at me, her eyes suddenly wide open. “Something good has just come to mind.”

I wondered what was going on in that brain of hers as her expression changed hectically. Her difficult expression had changed completely, and now it was like a cloudy sky that had just cleared up.

“Say, will you listen?” she said.

At that moment, I felt something like a strange premonition.

If I listen to her speak any further, I won't be able to turn back, will I? I thought.

... Even so, as if drawn in by her gaze, I gave her a simple response.

“What should I do?”

With this sequence of events, the strange relationship between me and Watarase Mamizu began.

PART 4

“I was thinking of having you do these, Takuya-kun,” Mamizu said, giving a slightly embarrassed laugh. There was something childish about her smile.

“... Huh?”

I couldn't quite take in what she was saying.

"I want you to do the things that I want to do before I die in my place. And then I want you to come here and tell me your impressions on those experiences."

"That's crazy..." I said, astonished. There were a hundred question marks floating around inside my head.

What's the point in that? If it were me, I'd only get pissed off if someone else was doing the things I wanted to do right in front of my eyes, I thought. But it seemed that Mamizu didn't think like this.

"After all, it can't be helped, can it? I can't go outside even if I want to. There's no other way. Don't you think it's a good idea?" Mamizu said, as if convincing herself.

She probably wanted to do these things herself. She would have considered that first. But the fact that there were circumstances preventing her from doing so was, in a way, something I could understand.

"... Well, I understand what you're trying to say. I just have to do what you want to do, right? So, tell me about those," I said as if pondering her idea, still confused.

"That's exactly it." Seeming to be happy for some reason, Mamizu smiled. "It wouldn't be good to start off with the heavy ones. I suppose we'll go with a light one to begin with. I wonder which one I should choose?" she said, opening her notebook and staring at it with a serious gaze. And then she suddenly broke into a smile. "Well then, I already have a request..."

Honestly, I had nothing but a bad feeling about this.

“I’ve always wanted to go to an amusement park before I die.”

According to Mamizu, she had only ever been to an amusement park when she was very young, with her parents. She was interested in what an amusement park would be like now that she was more aware of the world around her.

Since it was something that she wanted to do before she died, I’d expected something more spectacular. I’d been prepared for something like one of her dreams for the future that had never been fulfilled. But her desire was a petty one, like that of someone in the lower middle class. So I was a little let down at first.

“Huh? … That means….” Thinking about it and recalling the fact that the one doing this would be me, I felt flustered.

“So Takuya-kun, go to an amusement park in my place.”

“No, wait a minute! … You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m serious, you know?” Mamizu said with no signs of shyness, and then gave a mischievous laugh.

A week later, for some reason, I'd come to a famous theme park outside the prefecture.

Of course, I was alone.

How sad would a guy of my age have to be to come to an amusement park alone?

Amusement parks are places visited by families and lovers. This is an established fact. Nobody would come here alone.

And it was Golden Week. There was an incredible amount of people, people and people, as far as the eye could see. Of course, they were in groups, such as couples, families and friends. Naturally, I couldn't spot anyone who had come alone like me.

A guy going to an amusement park alone – it's difficult to imagine that such a guy would be in a sane state. He would either be a real amusement park freak, or simply crazy. But I was neither of those. I wasn't an amusement park freak, and I wanted to believe that I was still sane.

In fact, I stood out. That was to be expected. It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that I was attracting a lot more attention than the performers. The people passing by me sometimes looked at the dark expression on my face before leaving. There was the occasional person blatantly sneering at me, and delinquents pointing and laughing. I was definitely the center of attention.

I'm not a crazy person!

I wanted to shout this out with a megaphone. Just where in an amusement park would I be able to buy a megaphone? Would I be able to find out if I asked someone? Excuse me, I want a megaphone, where could I purchase one? Wait! I'm not a suspicious person. I'm not crazy! Please wait!

...

However, I had plans. I hadn't come to this amusement park just to play. Well, I had, but this wasn't just playing for me.

My first destination was the rollercoaster.

In a gloomy mood, I purchased a ticket and lined up for the rollercoaster. There was a one-hour wait for it. Ah, I wanted to go home. I'd become completely fed up with this.

Incidentally, I hated thrill rides. I'd been on one once as a child, and never again since. I didn't understand their purpose. What was so fun about riding in an exposed machine as it hurtled around high places at crazy speeds? I couldn't understand it at all. It wasn't that I was scared of them, that definitely wasn't it, but... in any case, I didn't want to ride them if I had the choice.

I'll never ride that again.

That is the worst ride ever created in the history of humanity, I thought.

After I got down from the rollercoaster, I walked slowly, feeling an indescribable sense of fatigue. My stomach was in chaos. I felt like throwing up the toast I'd eaten that morning. I felt sick. My spirits were at an all-time low.

Even so, my business here wasn't finished.

I continued on, heading for the store that Mamizu had specified. It was a café inside the amusement park that mostly sold sweets. After waiting in line for around thirty minutes, I went inside. It seemed that with everything in here, the time you spent waiting in line was longer than the time you spent enjoying the things you were waiting in line for. Ninety-five percent of the people in line were couples. That was the kind of sweet atmosphere this store had.

There were a lot of employees striding around the store, wearing revealing clothes designed to emphasize the chest. These uniforms were said to be one of the two specialties of this store, and enthusiasts apparently couldn't get enough of them. One of the employees brought a menu over, but without even looking at it, I placed my order as if spitting out the words.

“Please give me an ‘Our First Love’ parfait!”

The inside of the store became noisy. They were so noisy that I wanted to ask them what they were all so happy about. A guy on his own, in a store full of couples, ordering a First Love parfait. This parfait was the other specialty of this store.

“What is with that guy?”

“He’s dangerous.”

“He’s seriously dangerous.”

I could tell that everyone was whispering about me. I looked up at the ceiling and closed my eyes. I shut down my consciousness as much as I could.

What kind of punishment game is this?

I want to disappear, I want to disappear, I want to disappear.

While I was repeating this phrase over and over to myself in my head, the First Love parfait was brought to me.

A generous amount of strawberry sauce had been poured on the enormous parfait. There were numerous wafers inserted into it as if to make it livelier, and a heart-shaped piece of chocolate was enshrined in the center. It looked like it was enough for two or three people.

Was I going to eat this alone...?

I heard the click of a camera shutter from a cellphone.

I turned around in surprise wondering what it was and saw a couple in the seats behind me, taking a photograph of me. I glared at them silently, but it wasn’t very menacing.

This is shit. This is really shit.

Even as I thought this, I took a photograph of the parfait as well. Incidentally, the parfait cost 1,500 yen. *What a rip-off*, I thought. In the end, I ate it all by myself, as I thought it would be a waste if I didn’t. As I ate, the giggling laughter around me never stopped.

“Takuya-kun, you’re the best! My stomach hurts!”

Watarase Mamizu was laughing heartily after seeing the photo of the First Love parfait and hearing about my episode at the amusement park. She was laughing so hard that I wondered whether she was bothering the other people in the shared room.

“And then, and then? What did you do after the First Love parfait?” she asked.

“I went to the haunted house and got surprised by the ghosts, surprised by the kids on the merry-go-round, then got creeped-out looks from couples at the Ferris wheel, and then I came back,” I told her, feeling fed up.

“How did you feel? Was it fun?”

“It was the absolute worst feeling. I thought it would be best if a nuclear missile fell on that amusement park.”

Finding something about this hilarious, Mamizu burst into laughter once more. *So, she’s someone who laughs honestly like this*, I thought, a little surprised.

“I see, I see, thanks,” she said. “I guess amusement parks aren’t places you’re supposed to go alone after all.”

“Look here...”

I wanted to say, “You knew that fully well without having to go there, didn’t you?” But before I could, Mamizu began speaking again.

“Well then, about my next request,” she said, turning on the TV in the room. Each of the beds in this shared room had a TV, but I had never seen Mamizu watching hers until now.

After flipping through the channels for a while, she found the evening news program.

“This one, it’s this one!” Mamizu pointed at the TV screen, as if excited about something.

It was news about the sale of a new smartphone. It was the one that was so hard to get that queues formed every year on the day it went on sale. It was apparently going on sale at night this weekend.

“I’ve wanted to try waiting in an all-night queue,” Mamizu said.

... I decided to ignore her and go home.

“Wait! Wait, Takuya-kun.”

“I’m definitely not doing it!”

“Look at this.” Mamizu opened a drawer in the chest next to her bed and took out a cellphone. It looked really old; it was a flip phone of white color that had faded into ivory. “I’m still using a flip phone. I’ve been using this for four years, since before I was hospitalized. Don’t you feel sorry for me?”

It was true that people using such a retro, previous-era phone were rare these days.

“I want to try using a smartphone before I die,” she said wistfully.

“... But those are pretty expensive, you know,” I said. “Do you have money?”

“Ta-dah.” Mamizu produced a bankbook from another drawer.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“My New Year’s gift savings.”

So there really are people who save that money, I thought.

“My relatives like my grandpa and grandma give it to me every year, but in a place like this, I have even less things to spend it on than someone in prison. So, I’ve been saving it up.”

I looked at the bankbook Mamizu handed me to discover that there was indeed a considerable amount registered inside.

“Use that. I’ll tell you my PIN,” she said, handing me a cash card as well.

“Wait a second,” I said, finally feeling that this was somewhat heavy. “You can’t just go and tell someone else something like that, can you?”

“Why?” Mamizu asked, staring at me in puzzlement.

“It could be misused.”

“Are you going to misuse it, Takuya-kun?”

“Look here...”

I couldn’t mention it, but I got the feeling that she was doing this on purpose.

“You’re alright, Takuya-kun.”

With this unfounded statement, Mamizu pushed the bankbook towards me.

Late at night, when I tried to leave the house, my mother called out and stopped me.

“Where are you going at this time of night? Are you meeting someone?” My mother looked at me with a suspicious expression.

It was too bothersome to explain. It was nearly midnight. I was trying to catch the last train out.

“I’m going out to play for a bit,” I said.

“That’s what Meiko said that day when she went out.” My mother was staring at me with a needlessly serious look. “Takuya, you’re not going to die, are you?”

My mother said these crazy words to me. But this wasn’t the first time she’d said these kinds of things.

“There’s no way I’d die,” I replied, tired of this.

“You know, Takuya. If you were to die in some strange way as well, I’d...”

In that moment, I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Meiko was just in a car accident, right?”

“But...”

My mother tried to say something, but I didn’t want to hear any more.

“I’m fine,” I said.

Finding this conversation a little tiresome, I ended it there and went outside.

I got on the train and headed for the queue for the smartphone that Mamizu had asked for.

I was quite cold waiting in the all-night queue, despite it being spring. It seemed that there were a lot of people in this world with a lot of free time on their hands; a queue with many people had formed on the road of the business district. All alone, I shivered as I waited for the morning to come. Since I was unoccupied, I kind of thought back on the way my mother had been acting since Meiko died.

Since Meiko died, for some reason, my mother had always had a strange worry that I would die as well.

“There’s a typhoon, so don’t go to school today.”

When I asked her for a reason, she earnestly gave answers like, “What if you were blown away by the wind, hit your head on a sign and died?” or, “What

if a car slipped because of the rain and sped towards you?"

Seriously, spare me, I thought.

"What if you ate sashimi during the summer and died of food poisoning?"

"What if you fell asleep in the bath and drowned?"

"If you wear black clothes, you're going to be killed by bee-stings, aren't you?"

Just like this, my mother was zealous about perceiving omens of death in trivial, everyday things.

There was a time when my mother frequently visited a dodgy spiritualist. She made me come along with her. The reason was that about half a year before Meiko died in a traffic accident, her boyfriend at the time had died in a traffic accident in the exact same way. My mother had seriously thought that she'd been possessed by his evil spirit. In short, my mother had gone a little mad. Despite not having had any miscarriages, she had been told that she was possessed by the spirit of a miscarried fetus, and believed that for a while.

My mother's mind was a little ill.

And so, in the past, I was even forced to attend counseling. After Meiko died, I was quite depressed as well. It seemed that seeing this had made my mother worry. What if I became mentally ill and died as a result?

Have you ever thought that you want to die?

Are you sleeping well?

Do you have an appetite?

Is there anything troubling you right now?

I answered all of these with, “I’m fine.” I made sure to consciously act cheerful during such times.

I’m fine.

I’m normal.

There aren’t any problems.

Because of this, I was acquitted, but... even so, it seemed like my mother still doubted me.

Won’t this boy die sometime soon as well?

It seemed like this thought had always been on my mother’s mind.

It’s true that my personality had become somewhat more reserved after Meiko’s death. I remember not talking to my family much at all right after she died.

But isn’t that to be expected? At least, that’s what I thought.

If I’d started laughing more after my older sister’s death, wouldn’t that have been more of a sign that I’d gone mad?

I wished that my mother would go to counseling instead.

Mamizu gave an exaggerated, happy reaction when I brought her the smartphone that I'd purchased.

“Yay! I’m finally a part of civilization, too.”

Before handing it to her, I tried to give her an earful of how tiring the all-night queue had been, more out of resentment than anything. But while I was mid-sentence, Mamizu began unwrapping the smartphone’s packaging.

“Oi… It wasn’t that you were interested in being in an all-night queue, you just wanted a smartphone, didn’t you?”

“That’s not true, you know?” Mamizu said with a smile as she held the smartphone up in front of her eyes. “Wow,” she whispered in admiration, her eyes shining. “With this, it’ll be easier to get in contact with you, won’t it, Takuya-kun?” she said happily.

I was completely taken aback.

After that, Mamizu asked me to show her how to use the basic functions, and I recorded my number in there.

A few days later, Mamizu’s phone contract that she had asked her mother to organize ended, and her smartphone was finally connected to the internet. I was immediately sent a message.

> Thanks

That’s all that was written in it.

Could it be that she had been too embarrassed to say it in person? Without hesitating, I sent back the simple message of, “You’re welcome.”

During lunchtime at school, for some reason, Kayama was holding an Othello set, and suggested we play while eating. Before I could try to decline, he quickly joined the desk of the guy in front of me to mine and began setting up the Othello board and taking out his bento.

In the end, I had no choice but to be Kayama's opponent while eating the bread that I'd bought beforehand.

“Okada. When did you have your first crush?” Kayama asked suddenly, in the middle of our Othello game.

“Fourth year elementary. The girl in the seat next to me,” I said.

“Sixth year elementary for me. So, what became of yours?”

I could only vaguely recall her face. I didn't know where she was or what she was doing.

“Well, I've stopped caring about her,” I said.

I hadn't even approached her in any special way or confessed to her; our relationship and my faint love had come to a natural end with the changing of classes. But I think that's how first crushes are for most people.

“You know, I think trivial things don't really change. Things like our favorite foods, the way we eat our meals, how many tissues we use when we blow our nose,” Kayama said, using chopsticks to move the side dishes of his bento into his mouth with surprising dexterity.

“You use one tissue, right?”

“I use two.”

Kayama took the corner. My white pieces were all flipped over.

“But I think that the more important feelings are, the more easily they’re overturned, like Othello pieces,” Kayama said.

I couldn’t really understand what he was saying.

“But you know, I actually hate that,” he continued.

He talked like this from time to time. In other words, I had no idea what he was trying to say.

“... Come to think of it, I recently went and saw Watarase Mamizu, just as you told me,” I said.

The moment I said that, Kayama’s hand that was holding his chopsticks stopped. And then he stared at my face.

“What?” I said.

“... And then?” Kayama asked.

“Well, she’s relatively healthy. I don’t know the details, but it doesn’t seem like she’ll be dying for a while.”

I thought about explaining various things, but decided against it. The fact that I’d met her numerous times after that, and her list of things she wanted to do before she died. I didn’t know if it was alright to just go ahead and spill it out to others.

And I was a little angry at Kayama, who had continued to keep his real intentions behind making me go and meet Mamizu a secret. I didn’t think that

I had any obligation to tell him, either. And the most important factor was that explaining all of this strange, incomprehensible stuff would have been troublesome.

“Kayama, is there something you wanted to ask?”

“Well then, her three sizes.”

“Ask her yourself.”

It seemed that victory was Kayama’s in the game of Othello. Despite being the one to start it, he’d apparently lost interest partway through the game and stood up before it was over.

“Don’t you have to go and see her?” I asked him as he went to leave.

“... Not now,” he said after thinking for a moment. “I don’t lack women right now, after all,” he added.

“Are you planning to make a move on her?” I asked, laughing. I’d thought he was joking.

But Kayama stared at me silently for a while without making any more remarks, and then returned to his seat, not saying anything more in the end.

What’s all that about? I wondered, finding this more and more strange.

PART 5

Mamizu's mother, Ritsu-san, seemed like a somewhat forceful person.

There was a strained atmosphere about her, but at the same time, she was worn out. She had a well-featured face that made me think she'd probably been a beauty in the past. But there were no signs of her wearing any makeup, and although she was apparently still in her forties, she actually looked older.

“Ah, you've come again today,” she said.

That day was the second day that I'd met her. Her words were gentle, but there was something biting about the way she spoke. Ritsu-san never called me by my name. It was always “you.” I got the feeling that she didn't think much of me, someone she didn't know who had suddenly started frequently visiting her daughter's hospital room.

“Well then, I'm going home. Don't be in too high spirits; make sure you sleep quietly,” Ritsu-san said to Mamizu in a rather scolding tone, and then left the room.

“Takuya-kun, you've wearing a rather dark-looking expression today, aren't you?” Mamizu said as she looked at my face, sounding a little worried. “Are you alright? Are you not feeling well?”

“No... it's not a big deal,” I said.

“What's wrong?”

“My earphones broke.”

I took my earphones out of my pocket and showed them to Mamizu. I had been listening to music on my way to the hospital when they got caught on a tree branch. Now, I could only hear sound through one side.

“Were they expensive?” Mamizu asked.

“Not really,” I said.

But the earphones were a birthday present that Meiko bought for me with the pay from her first part-time job in high school, so it was kind of a shock for me.

Mamizu took my earphones and stared at them intently for a while. And then she looked at me with an expression that looked as if she’d just thought of a sinister idea. “Say, Takuya-kun.”

“What is it?”

She isn’t going to suggest something troublesome again, is she? I thought, bracing myself.

“Shall we try doing a little something that we shouldn’t do?”

The “something that we shouldn’t do” Mamizu had referred to was going to the store on the first floor of the hospital. She was apparently prohibited from

leaving her bed. But her excuse was that even if that was the case, being caught wouldn't cost us our lives.

I walked ahead to check the corridor. If we were seen by a nurse or doctor, it would be game over. We proceeded carefully through the corridor and arrived at the stairs. This was because we were more likely to run into someone if we took the elevator.

Mamizu clutched the handrail and descended the staircase with somewhat shaky steps.

“Are you actually alright?” I asked her.

“Don’t make fun of me. I’m not a grandma,” she said.

We reached the first floor and made it to the store safely. It was decided that I would stand at the store’s entrance and look out for anyone it would be bad for Mamizu to be found by.

“It’s here! Takuya-kun, it’s here!” Mamizu’s voice shouted at me quietly after a while.

I turned around to see what she was so happy about, and saw her waving at me like a child. Looking more closely, I could see that a package was being waved around in her hand.

“What is that?” I asked.

Mamizu drew closer and held the package up in front of my face.

“Look closely. It’s the same as your earphones, Takuya-kun.”

Indeed, it was the same brand and the exact same model. *What's she thinking?* I wondered. Had she made the effort of sneaking out of her hospital room just for something like this?

“Please give me this,” Mamizu said, and before I could stop her, she handed the earphones to the lady at the register.

“Even if you say that, you don’t have any cash, do you?” I said calmly.

“Ta-dah. I have a magic card,” Mamizu said, producing an IC card that I hadn’t seen before. “It’s a prepaid card for the hospital. If I have this, I can watch TV and do all kinds of things.”

“I mean, you don’t really have to buy them,” I said.

But Mamizu didn’t respond, and bought the earphones. “Treat them with care this time,” she said.

“It’s... not like I wasn’t treating them with care before.” I should have just thanked her, but for some reason, I said something else instead.

Mamizu suddenly became expressionless and stared at me.

“What? If you want to say something, say it,” I said.

In the next moment, Mamizu’s body swayed in a large, slow motion. Not giving me time to think about why, it collapsed towards me as if she were snuggling against me. I reflexively extended my hands and embraced her.

“Oi, what’s this all of a sudden?” I asked.

“Takuya-kun. I’m sorry. I’m in a bit of trouble now,” Mamizu said, and then, for some reason, she let out a self-deprecating laugh. “I can’t put any strength into my body.”

“Hey, you’re kidding, right?”

“I’m serious.”

In front of a store’s register, in a pose that looked like we were embracing each other, we’d become unable to move. *You’re kidding, right?* I thought one more time.

“Excuse me, could you please call someone?” I asked the lady at the register.

There was a bit of an uproar. Doctors and nurses came running with changing expressions. Mamizu was put on a stretcher, something like a bed with rollers attached to its legs for mobility, and taken away somewhere.

“I failed, huh?” Mamizu said while she was being carried off, gazing at the ceiling.

Of course, I didn’t get away free, either.

Ritsu-san, who had been on her way home, came back to the hospital within less than an hour.

She and I sat in chairs next to Mamizu's empty bed in her room and faced each other.

"I'll be honest. I don't really want you to come here," Ritsu-san said frankly. There was clear anger in her voice.

"I'm sorry." I made no excuse and simply apologized.

"Not only sad things, but enjoyable things, too, cause stress on humans. Do you understand? That girl is not normal," she continued.

I just sat there quietly and received her anger. Dozens of words that I wanted to say back to her floated in my mind, but I couldn't say anything.

After this continued for a while, Mamizu returned to the room.

She was sitting in a wheelchair with a nurse pushing it.

"Don't make her push herself too hard," the nurse said to me.

She seemed strong-willed and had a name tag that read 'Okazaki' on her chest.

I simply lowered my head.

And then, with the nurse and Ritsu-san's help, Mamizu crawled onto the bed. She sat up with her back pressed against the wall and looked at us one after another.

"Don't look at me with such scary faces," she said. "Everyone's making such a big fuss. These kinds of things happened quite often in the past, didn't they? It wasn't because we went to the store."

“That’s the kind of condition that you’re in, so something terrible might happen if you just go walking around,” Okazaki-san said, as if scolding Mamizu.

“You as well, this is how it is, so I want you to not say anything unnecessary to tempt her,” said Ritsu-san. “If possible, you should take this opportunity to stop coming...”

Before Ritsu-san could say anything more, a single tear flowed from Mamizu’s eye.

“I’m sorry,” Mamizu said.

I could see Ritsu-san falter.

“It’s not Takuya-kun’s fault. I forced him to come with me. So don’t say such things and don’t be angry. If you’re going to be angry, be angry only at me.” Mamizu cried, her eyes bright red.

“Watarase-san, calm down,” the nurse Okazaki-san said, giving Ritsu-san a signal with her eyes.

Ritsu-san’s expression looked as if she’d given up on something, and she softened her stance. “I have business to attend to. I’m going home now.”

Without even looking at me, Ritsu-san left the hospital room.

“You should quickly go home, too. Well... Whatever you do, make sure you do it in moderation.” With those last words, Okazaki-san left with rushed footsteps.

I stood up to go home as I'd been told and turned to look at Mamizu. She was still crying.

Mamizu looked at me. "Well, these are fake tears," she said.

I almost fell over. If that had been an act, it looked like a masterful one to me.

"I can't really stop this very easily." Tears were still flowing sorrowfully from Mamizu's eyes, but her tone had returned to normal. "But I'm sorry. For causing you trouble."

"Let's focus on not crying first." I took out a handkerchief and handed it to her.

"Thanks... Takuya-kun, you're nice sometimes, aren't you?"

"The 'sometimes' is unnecessary."

And so, I waited a short while for Mamizu to stop crying.

"I was feeling bad for everything you're doing for me. I wanted to do a little something for you as well, Takuya-kun," she said in a tone that sounded as if she was embarrassed by her failure.

So that's what she was thinking, I thought, a little surprised.

"I'll take care of these earphones," I said.

Mamizu looked at me, as if taken aback.

"Don't make that weird face."

“My face has always been like this,” Mamizu said, giving a slightly embarrassed laugh.

PART 6

Aimi City, a city in the neighboring prefecture with a population of less than half a million people, didn’t have any characteristic features.

It was paved evenly with concrete and overrun by chain stores. The students attending my high school would never come here to enjoy themselves. It was too far, and there were too few things that were actually better here.

Of course, there was a reason I had made the effort of going on a three-hour journey by train to get here.

Mamizu’s father lived in this city.

The reason her father lived in this faraway place was because, as Kayama had said, Mamizu’s parents were divorced.

Apparently through discussions between Mamizu’s father, who was managing a company, and her mother, Ritsu-san, it had been decided that Mamizu would live with Ritsu-san. But Mamizu had never heard the reason for the divorce directly from Ritsu-san. Even when she asked, the question had always been avoided.

“I want to ask my father why he and my mother got divorced.”

This was Mamizu's "thing she wants to do before she dies" this time.

Isn't that a bit too heavy to ask someone else to do? I'd thought.

"Please. I'm really serious; I want to know before I die, no matter what. But I haven't been told my father's phone number or e-mail address. I don't know what to do."

Indeed, Mamizu requested this of me very seriously. With a serious tone that was different from any other tone of speech she had used before.

"Could it be..." Something had occurred to me. "Have you been testing me up until now so that you could ask me to do this?"

When I broke the snow globe, Mamizu had told me that she wanted me to do the "things that she wants to do before she dies" in her place. That snow globe was a treasured possession given to her by her father.

That snow globe might have been the scenery in Mamizu's imagination.

A world inside a glass sphere in which snow continued to fall, as if time inside had stopped.

Perhaps for Mamizu, the house inside had been a reminder of the happy household that she'd once belonged to.

Hadn't she wanted communication with her father instead of that snow globe? Yet she couldn't meet her father. Isn't that why she had come up with the idea of making me do it in her place?

Hadn't all of the things up until now been a test for this task? Hadn't she just been hesitant to make such a heavy request from the beginning? This was

what I'd thought.

“... There’s no way that’s true, is there. I was just playing around by making you do crazy things, Takuya-kun.”

“Well, alright.”

In the end, I'd begun feeling like I couldn't really turn down Mamizu's requests once I'd heard them.

“I'll do what I can,” I'd said as I left the hospital room.

The only clue I had was that I knew his address. Mamizu's father had left the house where their family had once lived, and was now apparently living in his own house. That house was in Aimi city. Relying on my smartphone's map application, I found that house.

The doorplate read, “Fukami.”

I was a little nervous, but I boldly rang the intercom.

“Who is it?” said a man's voice.

Was this Mamizu's father?

“Is Fukami Makoto-san here?” I asked.

“There is nobody by that name here.”

There was something incredibly dark in the man’s voice. And there was something like wariness in it as well. But I’d definitely heard that Mamizu’s father lived here. What was the meaning behind telling me that that he wasn’t here?

“What is your business?” the man asked.

“Umm, my name is Okada Takuya. Actually, I’m an acquaintance of Mamizu’s... Mamizu-san’s. There is something I would like to talk to you about, if you could allow me.”

“Has something happened to Mamizu?” The tone in his voice had suddenly changed; it had a sense of urgency now.

And then the voice cut off. A short while later, a middle-aged man hurriedly came out from the house.

He was an unshaven, muscular man with dark, suntanned skin, and his clothes could only be described as pajamas. I didn’t really have a clear impression of him.

“I am Fukami Makoto. I am Mamizu’s father,” he said.

Honestly speaking, he was far off the stereotypical image of a president who ran a company. That was my first impression of Mamizu’s father.

“I see. I understand.”

I’d been let inside Makoto-san’s house, and I explained to him why I’d come here today at the table in his living room. The fact that Mamizu wanted to know why he and Ritsu-san had divorced.

“Mamizu-san… how do I put this? It seems that she thinks her illness, the fact that she has luminescence disease, was the cause of the divorce,” I said. “She thinks that maybe she was discarded out of disgust.”

“No… I think that the fault lies with me for not having gone and told her the truth,” Makoto-san said, looking at me with a direct look in his eyes. “By the way, are you Mamizu’s boyfriend, Takuya-kun?”

I accidentally spat out the tea that I’d been offered. “N-no! I’m, how do I put it… just an acquaintance,” I said.

“But it seems that at the very least, Mamizu trusts you. She wouldn’t ask a mere acquaintance to do something like this for her.”

That’s… I wonder, I thought. What does Mamizu think of me? It’s like I understand, but I don’t.

“By the way, Takuya-kun, what do you think of me?” Makoto-san asked.

“Huh?”

I got the feeling that this was my first time meeting an adult who would ask this question. To think that Makoto-san would be concerned about how he appeared in the eyes of a high school student – his question felt a little unusual to me.

“I kind of think you’re really wild,” I said honestly.

Makoto-san gave an indifferent laugh. The way he laughed was a little similar to Mamizu’s.

“I don’t look like the president of a company, do I?” Makoto-san said, still laughing but with a sharp look suddenly appearing in his eyes. That part of him was a little like Mamizu, too.

“No, that’s...” I was at a loss for words.

“So, you’re the type who can’t tell lies... you’ll suffer when it comes to women.” With those hint-like words, Makoto-san emptied the cup of tea in his hand in one go. “To tell you the truth, I’m not the president of a company anymore.”

And then Makoto-san began telling me the truth behind his divorce.

Makoto-san originally managed a small-scale component manufacturer in our city.

That company, which had pretty much started from being a small factory in town, succeeded in making a number of deals with major firms and grew rapidly. But just as a large-scale capital investment was made, a big-talking client apparently went bankrupt, and the business failed as a result.

Makoto-san had been cornered into personal bankruptcy, and after much thought, decided to divorce Ritsu-san before he declared bankruptcy. Once he declared personal bankruptcy, his personal assets such as his house and the funds in his bank account would be seized.

The treatment of Mamizu, who suffered from luminescence disease, cost a large sum of money. It was a disease that piled up medical bills. It could never be cured, and methods of treatment hadn't been established. Typically, patients were hospitalized and received continuous treatment. Makoto-san had thought that through divorce, he could leave money to pay for Mamizu's treatment.

It would have been problematic for Makoto-san to meet Mamizu and her mother in front of his creditors and debt collectors. That was why he hadn't even told Mamizu his contact details. He had now returned to his own home and was living with his elderly parents, Mamizu's grandparents, while performing dangerous physical labor on construction sites. And he was sending money to Ritsu-san in secret.

The two of them had decided to keep this a secret from Mamizu. They didn't want to cause any unnecessary concern for their ill, hospitalized daughter who had only known a wealthy life.

They'd thought that if they revealed everything, Mamizu would quit attending high school, at which she had poor prospects anyway. But Makoto-san didn't want her to quit high school in case there was a miraculous event and her illness was cured.

"Not only that, but maybe my pride was too high back then to reveal everything to my daughter," Makoto-san said.

That was the truth behind the divorce of Mamizu's parents.

It was so much that I couldn't even give any responses; I simply sat there and listened.

"Are you going to tell my daughter all of this?" Makoto-san asked when he was finished. It seemed that he still had doubts.

"It might be impertinent of me to say this, but... I think that it's cruel to hide things out of kindness or consideration. It's unbearable for the one things are being kept hidden from," I said.

"You have a way with words, don't you?" Makoto-san was listening to me speak with a bitter smile on his face.

Even so, I continued. "Mamizu-san wants to know the truth before she dies."

"Die, huh. You have a very clear way of speaking, don't you?" Makoto-san said, his face suddenly becoming serious. For a second, I thought he was angry. But I was wrong. "It might be just as you say, Takuya-kun. Maybe I should tell Mamizu these things properly."

And then Makoto-san gave me a forced smile. I covered my face, somewhat embarrassed at having said too much.

"Actually, I have something to apologize to you about, Makoto-san," I said, and I took out a certain object out of my bag. It was the snow globe that I had broken. "I dropped it and it broke. I'm really sorry."

The contents of the snow globe, the now-bare log house, had toppled over.

“You really don’t lie, do you?” Makoto-san said, looking surprised. “It’s fine. Everything that has a form eventually breaks.” He spoke the exact same words as Mamizu. “But Mamizu is...” He couldn’t say any more.

“I’m sure she’s really sad.” I managed to finish his sentence.

“Alright. Well, I’ll do something about it. Don’t worry about it,” Makoto-san said to me.

“Umm, could you at least tell Mamizu-san your contact details?” I asked Makoto-san as I was leaving.

Makoto-san pondered for quite a long while. “Only if she promises not to ask me to meet her,” he said finally, handing me a memo with an e-mail address written on it. “Takuya-kun, make sure you get along well with Mamizu,” he said to me at the end.

I simply replied, “Yes, sir.”

When I went to her hospital room, Watarase Mamizu was spending that day reading a book as well. Looking carefully, it was the same paperback book that she was always reading. *I’m surprised that she can keep reading the same book without getting tired of it*, I always thought.

“How was it?” Mamizu asked, not taking her eyes off the book’s pages.

“Has Father at least found a new woman?”

I got the vague feeling that these words weren't a reflection of her true feelings. She was feeling nervous to hear my report, too. She was only saying these words to hide that nervousness and act strong. Even so, I didn't want her to listen to Makoto-san's story while she was speaking with that tone and acting in that manner.

"Makoto-san told me his story properly." I sat on the round chair next to Mamizu's bed and looked at her intently. And then I stopped her hands that were turning the pages of her book. "So you need to listen properly too, Mamizu."

"... Alright," Mamizu said, very obediently.

And so, I told her the story I'd heard from Makoto-san, from start to finish.

I told her that Makoto-san hadn't abandoned her, that it was the exact opposite, and that he was now putting all his effort into working for her sake. That he'd kept the reasons behind the divorce from her because he didn't want her to worry about his lifestyle while she was in hospital. That he didn't want Mamizu to worry about anything after learning of all of this, and that she should feel the same way towards him as she had done up until now.

I took my time telling her all of this in order to convey Makoto-san's feelings as accurately as possible. And at the end, I handed her the memo with contact details that Makoto-san had given me.

"So, Father and Mother didn't get divorced because they had become on bad terms with each other." This was the first thing Mamizu said after listening to what I had to say.

“Yeah. Makoto-san said that your mother is still an important partner to him,” I said.

“Say Takuya-kun. If I didn’t become sick, the two of them wouldn’t have separated, would they?” Mamizu spoke such words.

“That’s wrong, Mamizu,” I said.

“It would have been best if I was never born, right?” Mamizu said with a dark expression.

“That’s not true. Makoto-san, your father, doesn’t think that at all,” I said out of conditioned reflex, with almost no thought behind my words. Even I was surprised at myself for being able to say these words as if they came naturally.

“But it’s true, isn’t it? I’ve become sick and all I do is make the people around me unhappy. And if my illness could be cured and I could live, it would still be alright. But I’m definitely going to die. So there’s no meaning to this, is there?”

Mamizu’s voice sounded so dispirited that I shuddered. What was I supposed to say at a time like this? I tried to say something. All kinds of words floated into my mind, like “Cheer up,” or “It’s alright,” but none of them struck me as appropriate.

“It was even bothersome for you, wasn’t it? Having met such a troublesome, sick girl. Doing what she says. I’m going to stop being spoiled by you now, Takuya-kun.”

At that moment, I couldn't give her any positive words. I thought that her earnest feelings couldn't be healed with light-hearted words. I thought that I as a human was too insignificant to say such words to her.

And most importantly, I couldn't believe in such words myself. I thought that if I spoke words that I myself didn't believe, they would sound hollow and dishonest.

“You still have a lot of things on your ‘things you want to do before you die’ list, right? What do I need to do next?” I asked.

Mamizu looked at me with a surprised expression. “But don’t you dislike it?”

“Well... I suppose I don’t dislike it,” I said after a little thought.

It was a little difficult for me to be any more honest than that.

“Takuya-kun, could it be that you’re actually a really good guy?” Mamizu stared at me blankly.

“I guess I am,” I replied, feeling exasperated.

CHAPTER 2:

FIRST AND LAST SUMMER

It became summer. I'd first met Mamizu just at the start of spring, but now the hot summer days that caused sweat to well up on the skin had well and truly begun. I was surprised at myself for thinking of the changing of the season in relation to Mamizu.

Normally, summer vacation would mean freedom. Despite that, I was a little busy during that time.

“I’ve always wanted to try working a part-time job at a maid café,” said Mamizu.

Well, it was true that I’d been running out of money recently, so I had been feeling a need to get a part-time job. I didn’t have any preferences as to what kind of work it was, so I suppose you could say that I was fine with anywhere.

That being said, there was no need for me to work at a maid café of all places.

I tried calling out of desperation rather than just giving it a try because I had nothing to lose, and I somehow managed to get an interview. I went to the café at the specified time during its opening hours, was shown into an office at the back and was immediately put through an interview.

The one who interviewed me was a man in about his mid-thirties who introduced himself as the owner. He was wearing a black shirt, white necktie, Chrome Hearts jewelry and there was a tattoo on his arm peeking out of his sleeve. No matter how I looked at it, his fashion sense couldn't be called anything respectable.

“I was just looking for some male help in the kitchen, you see,” he said.

Apparently, my role was helping make the dishes that the maids served. *I see, that work would be fine for a male to do*, I thought, with a look of comprehension making its way onto my face for the first time. The owner stared at me as if he was looking at something strange.

“What, there’s no way you wanted to be a maid, right?” he said.

He was probably joking, but I couldn’t do anything except desperately force a smile.

He told me to start tomorrow. It wasn’t that far off Mamizu’s request of working at a maid café, and it would fulfil my objective of getting a part-time job. *Well, this can probably be considered a success*, I thought as I immediately agreed.

My part-time job had been sorted out, so I got the feeling that it was alright to spend a little money. I’d just remembered Mamizu saying, “I’ve always wanted to have a pet.”

Both of her parents had allergies, so she had never had a dog or a cat. There was also the fact that tests showed Mamizu herself was allergic as well.

“It doesn’t have to be a dog or a cat; I don’t want one that dies so quickly. I want one that lives long, that at least won’t die before me,” she’d said.

“Like a turtle?”

I’d suggested it as a joke, but she’d exclaimed, “That’s it!”

But where was I supposed to buy a turtle?

On the way back home from the maid café, I looked on the internet to find out that there was conveniently a nearby store at which I could buy a turtle. When I went to the pet corner of the hardware store, I did indeed find turtles being sold.

Turtles were cheap.

I’d lived my life up until now without ever knowing the market price of turtles, but even the most expensive ones were less than a thousand yen. *If it’s this cheap, can’t I just buy it without even having to wait for my pay from the part-time job?* I thought.

Cranes live for a thousand years, turtles live for ten thousand.

So the proverb goes, but I wonder how long turtles actually live. I’m sure they don’t actually live for ten thousand years. They could be considered monsters if that were the case.

I asked the store employee, and he said they live for up to thirty years. But when I asked him more questions, I found out that turtles need a water tank

and various other things to take care of them, and these cost quite a bit of money. I told him that I'd be back and left for now.

“Welcome home, Master! I’m Riko-chan!”

This was the greeting given to me on the first day of my part-time job by a short-haired maid with bright hair. I felt really apologetic.

“Umm, I’m working here starting today. My name is Okada,” I said.

The maid’s face turned visibly red, right before my eyes. “Th-the service entrance is that way. This is the entry hall for the customers,” she said, seeming quite embarrassed despite the fact that I was definitely in the wrong here. “I’m Hirabayashi Riko. I’m forever seventeen, but I’m actually seventeen, in my second year of high school. That’s a secret from the customers, though. Nice to meet you.”

I quickly thanked her and then headed for the service entrance.

I went inside and was told that the owner was absent. Without even having time to introduce myself, I was quickly told by a senior maid to get in the kitchen. Since I was in charge of food preparation, I didn’t have a uniform; I was just required to wear a white shirt and black trousers. I put on an apron in place of a uniform and entered the kitchen.

Surprisingly, there wasn’t a senior member in the kitchen.

I was told that the person in charge of cooking had a fight with the owner and quit months ago, and the maids had been taking turns to do the work.

“Hurry, help out,” the senior maid said.

In stark contrast to the relaxed atmosphere inside the store, the inside of the kitchen was hellishly busy. There were maids navigating this deadly environment, never standing still, never stopping their hands from moving. I learned by watching them and helped them with their work.

I started working at noon, and it was ten o’clock at night when I finished. Exhausted, I was sitting in the office when the short-haired maid I met earlier when I arrived called out to me.

“Good work,” she said.

“Ah... Riko-chan-san.”

In that store, the maids referred to each other by their given names and added -chan. The customers referred to them like this as well, so the staff did the same. I was a little embarrassed, but when in Rome, I had to do as the Romans did. I followed this practice without going against the flow, but since they were older than me, I used a double honorific by adding -san.

“Okada-kun, how was your first day at work?” Riko-chan-san asked.

“I made a cake for the first time in my life,” I said.

Since they were short-handed, I was made to do all kinds of things. It was my first time working a part-time job, but my honest impression was that I hadn’t thought that it would be this tiring.

“If you want, we could go home together,” Riko-chan-san said.

I didn’t have any reason to decline, so I waited for her to get changed, and then we went home together.

“Okada-kun, are you around the same age as me?” she asked.

“No, I’m a year younger. I’m in my second year of high school,” I said.

“Wow! I see. You know, surprisingly enough, everyone is older than me here. I was the youngest. So I’m happy that you joined us! … Actually, being fully in charge of the cooking is tough, so everyone quits right away. I was a little worried, so I called out to you.”

I see; it seems that this work can indeed be considered harsh.

“But, well… I think I’ll continue,” I said. “Probably.”

Riko-chan-san looked surprised. “Huh, it’s rare for people to say that. Is there some kind of reason? Like wanting to save up some money and buy your girlfriend a present?”

“… Well, I have my reasons.”

“And a girlfriend?”

“Do I look like I have one?”

“I guess it’s hard to say,” Riko-chan-san said, laughing.

At night, I arrived home exhausted, and it seemed that my parents had already withdrawn to their bedroom. Dinner had been wrapped and left on the table. I didn’t have much of an appetite, so I put it in the fridge, quickly took a shower and decided to go to my own bedroom.

As I climbed the stairs and went out into the corridor, I saw that the door to my sister Meiko’s room was open. That was unusual. Meiko’s room had been left in the exact same state it had been in when she died. I’d thought that it was best to throw her things out and turn her room into a storage room or something, but with that said, I’d never had the heart to say that to my parents. Of course, nobody normally entered the room.

I went inside and turned the light on. It was probably my mother who had been in here. The room’s closet had been left open. At the very least, my father wasn’t the type of person to do something sentimental like this. Cardboard boxes were piled up inside the closet, containing my older sister’s possessions.

Looking at these things would only bring sadness. Even as I thought this, I looked inside the cardboard boxes. The box on the very top was filled with textbooks. Since Meiko had attended a different high school from me, the

textbook lineup was quite different from mine. I picked up the Japanese language textbook and flicked through it.

There was a page with a red line drawn on it.

It was a poem, ‘Spring Day Rhapsody,’ by Nakahara Chuuya.^[3]

When the ones we love die,
we must commit suicide.

There was a red underline beneath the first verse.

... The fact that a red underline had been drawn here probably meant that my sister had a special interest in this book. But with that said, I couldn't understand poems at all. Actually, was there a single person in this world who *could* understand them? At the very least, I'd never met such a person in my life. I thought it was quite surprising that my older sister was the kind of person who understood poems. While she was alive, if I had to say, Meiko was... at least, up until her boyfriend died, a lively character; by no means did she give off the impression of being a girl who was interested in literature.

I recalled Meiko's boyfriend.

He was kind of an over-the-top, well-spoken sportsman, a type of person I didn't get along with.

How much had Meiko loved him?

Still, it was quite a dark poem. Dark enough to make me wonder whether it was alright to put it in a textbook.

When the ones we love die, we must commit suicide.

There's no way that's true, I retorted lightly in my mind.

“Do they really make omelet rice dishes with heart-marks on them?”

Mamizu was very interested to hear stories about my part-time job.

“Actually, I’m the one who makes most of them,” I said.

Finding something very funny about this, Mamizu clutched her stomach and laughed. “Ah, stop it, my stomach hurts!”

“It’s quite interesting. They’re dedicated to the maid uniforms, too,” I said, showing Mamizu a photo I’d taken on my phone.

“This person... who is she?”

“Ah, that’s Riko-chan-san. I said I wanted to take a photo of the uniform, and she agreed to be my model. She’s a senior, one year older than me.”

For some reason, Mamizu suddenly made a disinterested noise and glared at me with a bored look on her face. I was bewildered, having no idea as to the reason for her abrupt bad mood. Seeming angry, she opened her mouth to speak.

“I want to go bungee-jumping,” she said in a stabbing, knife-like tone.

“... No, no, no, no.”

“I want to, I want to, I want to, I want to!” Mamizu said, as if throwing a tantrum.

“I definitely won’t do it,” I told her.

PART 2

On a certain day, I was being made to sign a written agreement at the head of a suspension bridge located at a remote mountain.

Putting it simply, it said that if some accident happened and I was injured or killed, it was my own responsibility. The contents of this agreement only stirred up more fear in me. I immediately felt a desire to go home.

However, once I signed this, the only thing left to do for me was to get in line and wait for my turn.

“KYAAAAAAH!” a flying woman screamed, sounded as if she was dying.

Why did I have to go out of my way and pay money to do something like this?

I got the feeling that I was being put through something really unreasonable.

And while I was feeling nervous, it became my turn. The person in charge attached the metal fittings to my body in no time. I had no choice but to harden my resolve.

I arrived at the designated point right in the middle of the suspension bridge, took out my phone and started a video call with Mamizu. On the other side of the screen, Mamizu was eagerly awaiting my bungee-jump.

“Excuse me, please leave your phone behind,” the person in charge warned me, but before he could stop me, I jumped.

I was tossed about in the air.

My vision turned into something incredible. I was approaching the surface of the river below the suspension bridge at an unbelievable speed. My instincts told me that I was going to die.

“UWAAAAAAH!” I screamed pathetically as I fell, and then the wire stretched to its limit and sent me flying upwards. I was flying through the sky.

“KYAHAHAHAHHA!” Mamizu roared with laughter. I wasn’t in a state to see anything else she was doing.

“UWAAAH!”

“KYAHAAAAHAA!”

“UWAAAAAAAH!”

“KYAHAAAAHAAHAAHAA!”

This process repeated itself several times, and then I finally came to a stop. My body swayed like the pendulum of a clock, suspended by the rope.

“Are you satisfied now?” I asked Mamizu in a slightly unhappy voice.

“Yeah, it was fun,” Mamizu said with a delighted smile.

One day, at ten o’clock in the morning, I got a call from Kayama. Thinking that it was going to be some troublesome business anyway, I considered ignoring it for a moment, but in the end, I answered it.

“There’s something I want you to help me with.”

Those were Kayama’s very first words. I immediately regretted answering the call.

“What do you think I’ve been doing lately?” he asked.

“From the bottom of my heart, I have no interest whatsoever,” I said.

I wasn't particularly interested in Kayama's private life, and I thought he could just do what he wanted. As long as he didn't get me involved.

“I’m cutting my relations with women. I want to break up with all of them.”

Kayama didn't have a girlfriend. His motto was, “I have a principle of not getting a girlfriend.” But on the other hand, he was popular with girls. So, he made moves on whoever he could get his hands on, and he sometimes got himself into trouble, even if they only lasted a semester. And for some reason, he had called me to say that he intended to break up with all of them.

“There's one problematic woman. No matter what I do, she won't break up with me. Things won't be settled no matter what I say, so I want you to talk to her for me,” he said.

“Look here...”

I couldn't help but be exasperated. Was there anything as insincere as having someone else break up with your girlfriend for you?

“In any case, I'm definitely not doing it,” I said.

“... Say, Okada. What should I do? I've been cornered. I feel like I'm going crazy,” Kayama said.

His voice had suddenly become meek. Even through this phone conversation where I couldn't see his face, I could tell how depressed he was.

“Can you meet me today? Meet me directly and give me some advice.”

In the end, Kayama convinced me forcibly and I agreed to meet him under the promise that I was just going to give him advice.

I was told that we were meeting at a window-side seat of a nearby family restaurant. Around the time I arrived, I got a message from Kayama saying, “I’m at the seat furthest inside, by the window.” But Kayama wasn’t there. There was someone else sitting in that spot instead.

I knew that person very well.

“Huh? Why are you here, Okada-kun...?”

It was my homeroom teacher, Yoshie-sensei. For a moment, my head was filled with panic. And then the worst-possible scenario occurred to me, and I felt myself getting a headache. *I really want to kill that guy*, I thought.

The reason was, Yoshie-sensei was crying. She had been crying long before I came here.

“Could it be that you were called out here by Kayama, Yoshie-sensei?” I asked.

“Huh? ... Yes, that’s right.”

Yoshie-sensei had been using her phone right up until just before I arrived. She was probably telling Kayama which seat she was sitting in.

“Kayama can’t come. So instead... I’ll hear you out,” I said.

“Wow, Akira-kun has told you about his relationship with me, Okada-kun. He really looks down on people, doesn’t he?”

Yoshie-sensei called him Akira-kun, not Kayama-kun. With that, I had no choice but to accept the situation.

The woman that Kayama had laid his hands on, the one he was trying to break up with, was our homeroom teacher, Yoshie-sensei.

Aren't you a little too lacking in integrity? I thought.

“There is something crucial to human beings that is broken in him. It's best not to take him seriously,” I said, trying to console Yoshie-sensei.

Actually, I had no idea how to act in a situation like this. I'd never even broken up with someone myself; how could I handle someone else's breakup?

“In other words, he isn't capable of honestly dating a living human being,” I continued. “I once asked him how he views life. He treats it like a game. He was just testing how many people he could date at the same time. He doesn't think of anyone but himself. I came here today because he asked me to break up with you in his place, Sensei. What do you think? He's the worst, isn't he?”

“Okada-kun, how can you speak of Akira-kun so badly?” Yoshie-sensei asked. “Aren't you two friends?”

“We're not friends,” I said. “We don't really get along. I'm actually quite bad at dealing with Kayama, because he's a human from another world.”

“Then why did you come here today, Okada-kun?”

“For me, Kayama isn’t a friend, but… a savior. It’s difficult to explain, though. But that’s all it is.”

“I don’t understand,” Yoshie-sensei said, covering her face. “When I look at Akira-kun, I sometimes get scared. I don’t feel at ease. I get the feeling that he might just drop out and waste his life away. I can’t help worrying about him; I don’t want to let him go. If I remember correctly, Akira-kun lost his older brother in an accident, didn’t he? I heard from his middle school teacher that that’s when he started straying from the right path. And he attempted suicide at school once, didn’t he? Those kinds of reports get passed on from middle school to high school.”

I suddenly felt the urge to laugh. “Sensei, that’s a misunderstanding,” I said. “Kayama would never do something like attempting suicide. He’s like a solid mass of will to live. He can live on his own even if you don’t worry about him, and he would never be influenced by other people anyway. That’s why it’s alright. That’s the only part about him I respect a little.”

Yoshie-sensei made an expression that told me that she couldn’t understand. “Right now, I’m being made a fool of not only by Kayama-kun, but you as well, aren’t I? I’m really miserable, huh. I’m so pathetic and helpless; I feel like I want to disappear.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, apologizing.

“I was serious,” said Yoshie-sensei.

“Kayama was playing,” I said, matching the rhythm of my words with hers as if making fun of her. I wanted to make her angry. I wanted her to get angry, use that anger and make a decision with her feelings.

“Okada-kun, I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Can I pour my Coke on you?”

“Sure.”

In the next moment, Yoshie-sensei actually poured the Coke that she had been drinking on me. And then she left the family restaurant, leaving me behind, soaked.

I went out and called Kayama.

“I think Yoshie-sensei is a kind person,” I said.

“That’s why I don’t want to be with her,” Kayama said, laughing. I thought it sounded like a psychopath’s laughter.

“I hate you,” I said, and then I hung up without saying anything else.

I hadn’t gotten used to my part-time job at all, but fortunately, with Riko-chan-san’s help as well, I didn’t struggle when it came to interpersonal relationships. I’d been a little worried that I’d feel out of place in a workplace filled with only women, but it seemed that Riko-chan-san was skillfully helping me out. That’s how the atmosphere was.

“Riko-chan-san, you’re always helping me out when I make a mistake, aren’t you? Sorry, and thank you,” I said to Riko-chan-san in thanks one day as she and I were walking home together.

“I don’t want you to quit on us, Okada-kun. I won’t be happy if you don’t become established in the kitchen,” Riko-chan-san said, giving a slightly embarrassed laugh. “Do you have something to do after this, Okada-kun?” she asked in a casual tone.

“Ah… sorry. I’m actually going to dance now,” I said.

“Huh?” Riko-chan-san sounded surprised.

“Just at the nearby club,” I added.

“Wow, Okada-kun, you don’t look like the kind of person who would go to places like that.”

“Ah, yeah. I’m *not* the kind of person who would go to places like that,” I said, not knowing how to explain things.

“… Then I’ll come with you,” Riko-chan-san said.

It was my turn to be surprised. “Riko-chan-san, you don’t look like the type who dances, either.

“Despite my looks, I do dance,” she said with a bold laugh, leaving me wondering whether it was true or not.

> I've come to the club now, just like you wanted me to

I sent this message to Mamizu, and there was a quick reply.

> How do you feel?

> Scared

That was my honest impression. I saw muscular men with tattoos all over their bodies, and women who were laughing without restraint, under the effects of alcohol or maybe something else.

It was dim, there were questionable pink and green lights flickering, and it was filled with a kind of restless atmosphere. It was the kind of place that people younger than eighteen shouldn't be allowed inside in the first place. I was honestly afraid, wondering when someone would get angry at me for being here.

> Take a photo without being noticed!

That's what Mamizu said, but when I started up my camera, I noticed that my remaining battery was at 2%.

> Unfortunately, my battery is empty. This device will now cease communications

> I see. Well, I will pray for your good fortune

While we were having this conversation that sounded like it was coming from a stranded spaceship, my battery really died.

“Okada-kun, are you having fun?” Riko-chan-san said, swaying as she appeared. It seemed that she was actually accustomed to places like this, and the way she was dancing was quite masterful.

“This is quite difficult, isn’t it?” I was imitating her, swaying my body like she was.

“Okada-kun, you’re terrible. Like this,” Riko-chan-san said, bending her body more intensely.

“Like this?” Learning from her, I tried to dance as well.

Suddenly, a group of gaudy-looking men came and called out to Riko-chan-san.

“Hey, hey, won’t you come and drink with us?”

Oh.

This is what’s known as picking a girl up.

It’s my first time seeing it.

“Unfortunately, I’m here with my boyfriend today,” Riko-chan-san said, wrapping her arm around my waist, surprising me quite a bit. “Sorry.”

“Who is this guy?”

The gaudy men glared at me intently. I sensed trouble.

For a few moments, I wondered what I should do.

And then...

“YAY!” I shouted, and I avoided the gaudy men by dancing.

The gaudy men were exasperated, and Riko-chan-san laughed.

“That’s how I heroically saved Riko-chan-san, my senior at my part-time job, from being hit on. What do you think?”

I’d exaggerated this episode quite a bit as I described it to Mamizu.

“Aren’t you kind of lying a bit, Takuya-kun?” Mamizu was sharp as usual.

I averted my gaze and pretended I hadn’t heard her. “Well, in any case, that place is full of danger. You never know when you’ll encounter a monster. It was the right decision for me to go there in your place, Mamizu.”

“... Well, I suppose it’s fine,” Mamizu said, looking like she wanted to say something more.

“What?”

“It’s nothing.” Mamizu went deep into thought for a moment, and then opened her mouth again. “Actually, there is something.”

“What?” I asked, exasperated.

“It’s hard to explain.”

Could it be...?

“Mamizu, are you jealous?”

“... I want to do this next. Do it,” Mamizu said, speaking in a stabbing tone again. And then she handed me her phone. There was a video on a video website on the screen. Feeling afraid, I pressed play.

There was a magician on the screen, spitting fire like a dragon.

“No, that’s impossible!” I said, looking up at the ceiling.

While we were talking, the nurse that I regularly saw here came. She said that Mamizu had to go for an inspection, and Mamizu was taken away.

I usually went home at this hour as well, but this time, I suddenly became curious and went back to Mamizu’s hospital room instead. Before I arrived, oddly enough, she had been reading a fashion magazine. She normally only read paperback books, so this was a strange choice for her. I’d kind of wanted to check out what kind of magazine it was.

I flicked through the pages of the fashion magazine in the hospital room while Mamizu was absent.

It was a magazine with fashion that quite chic, with a mature taste. It was mainly introducing overseas collection brands. The models were mostly foreigners, too.

Now that I thought about it, I’d only ever seen Mamizu in pajamas. Maybe it couldn’t be helped because she was hospitalized, but she probably wanted to dress properly. But maybe she hadn’t told me because she was too

embarrassed. But... in what kind of world would a single one-piece dress cost 1,900,000 yen? What did these people normally eat? Caviar?

As I continued flicking through the magazine's pages out of curiosity, I noticed that one of the pages had been folded. Wondering what it was, I looked closely to see that it was a full-page advertisement for a pair of red high-heels. On a whim, I used my phone to take a picture of that page.

PART 3

“Okada-kun, what’s wrong? You looked dead during work today,” Riko-chan-san said, sounding worried.

“Riko-chan-san, have you ever breathed fire...?” I asked.

“Huh? Fire?”

“I breathed fire before work today...”

Riko-chan-san made a bewildered expression. It seemed that she didn’t really understand what I was saying. I supposed that was to be expected. If someone were to tell me the same thing, I’d have to think that they might be crazy.

“Are you alright?” Riko-chan-san asked.

“Yes, I suppose,” I said.

Even after work, when we were walking along the road together, Riko-chan-san was still worried. My face must have looked terrible.

“Ah, I’ll take my leave here. I’m going to buy a turtle on my way home today,” I said.

“A turtle?” Riko-chan-san made an expression as if to say that she really didn’t understand me anymore. “Should I come along?”

“No, it’s alright.”

“I’m free, you know.”

“No, this is... I want to choose a turtle on my own.”

I’d kind of become very picky when it came to reptiles. I wondered if it was alright to be like this.

When I got home, my mother raised her voice in surprise.

“Takuya, what on earth is that?” she asked. That was her immediate response to seeing her son come home holding a water tank, a turtle and the various tools needed to take care of it.

“I’m going to take care of this turtle from now on,” I said, holding the turtle up so that my mother could see it.

My mother groaned, putting a hand on her forehead as if she was feeling dizzy. “You haven’t gone crazy, have you?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.”

As my mother grumbled and complained, I set up the water tank in a corner of the living room.

“You’ve been kind of restless recently, haven’t you?” she said.

Indeed, I was an indoor-type person, the kind who would spend most of the day in the house unless they had something to do. Thanks to Mamizu, I’d been going places and doing things more often.

“I wonder if it means you’re feeling better,” my mother said with a sigh.

From an outside perspective, perhaps I looked as if I’d become livelier after changing religions or something. The truth was different, though.

“Wow” said Mamizu, her eyes sparkling. “It’s a turtle!”

Was it alright to bring a turtle into a hospital room? No, no matter how I thought about it, it wasn’t, but... I’d put it inside my bag and snuck it in.

“Amazing, you remembered!” Mamizu said.

“Because I received my pay from my part-time job early,” I said.

But isn't Mamizu the only person in the world who would be this happy about a turtle? I thought.

"Hey, hey, what's its name?" Mamizu asked.

"Name? A turtle is a turtle, right?" I replied plainly.

"Are you serious...?"

"Yeah."

"That can't be!" Mamizu shouted, sounding angry. Happy, angry, she was a hectic person as usual.

"Even Natsume Souseki¹ just called his cat 'cat' without giving it a name," I said. "It's fine for this guy to be 'turtle,' right?"

"You're not Souseki, are you, Takuya-kun! You've never studied abroad in London, and you've never become ill at Shuzen Temple!"

Mamizu was knowledgeable about strange things.

"Well then, you name it, Mamizu," I said, finding it too bothersome.

"Huh? Can I? Can I?" Mamizu looked kind of happy.

"I'm anticipating that you'll have a good naming sense."

"Kamenosuke²."

"You have no sense!" I was surprised by how terrible it was.

"It's fine, right? It's cute. Isn't it, Kamenosuke?"

It seemed that ‘Kamenosuke’ had become established as the turtle’s name in Mamizu’s head. And so, the pet of my house was auspiciously named.^[4]

PART 4

After that, I spent my days fulfilling Mamizu’s unreasonable requests. Among the ‘things she wanted to do before she died,’ which she asked me to do one after another, there were plenty that made me want to ask, “Did you really want to do that before you died? You’re not just coming up with things and enjoying watching me suffer, are you?” But I reluctantly did most of them.

She said that she wanted to act out the scenes that are often seen in manga where a character steals a persimmon from a tree in the neighborhood and then gets yelled at, which I actually did and got yelled at (I apologized like crazy). I also did her request of participating in an eating challenge. I received an enormous bowl of pork cutlet on rice, and, of course, paid 3,000 yen without being able to finish it.

I even did her request of going to a beauty parlor, pointing at a magazine and saying, “Please make me the same as this person.” The result was a hairstyle that was no different from usual.

She told me she wanted to hit a home run, so I started going to the batting center at night after work. I continued performing countless full swings until I

finally hit the target marked “home run” on the third day. For some reason, the prize was a ping-pong paddle.

She said she wanted to experience being hit on once, so I stood at an intersection downtown. Of course, nobody called out to me. I tried calling out to women walking past, saying, “Will you please hit on me?” But they mistook it for some new pick-up technique and just shouted abuse at me.

I did the one where she wanted to sing at a karaoke until her voice went hoarse. Mamizu laughed at me the next day when she heard me talking with my hoarse voice, sounding like an evil wizard.

I didn’t do every single one of Mamizu’s requests. That’s because there were some that were impossible to fulfil for various reasons.

She told me that she wanted to get in a taxi and say, “Please take me to the ocean.” But I felt unsure as to whether the amount of money I had would be enough for that, so I decided to leave that one alone for now.

There was also one where she wanted to kill a zombie, but unfortunately, zombies didn’t exist in the world we lived in, so I couldn’t kill any. Of course, the one where she wanted to drive at 200 kilometers per hour was impossible as well. I didn’t have a driver’s license, and probably wouldn’t have done it even if I did have one.

Well, in any case, I was impressed at how she could come up with all of these various things. I couldn’t really think of anything that I wanted to do myself.

Every time I did one of Mamizu’s foolish ‘things she wanted to do before she died’ and delivered my report on the experience, she laughed like she was

really enjoying herself. As a matter of fact, I didn't have any negative feelings about it, either. I quite enjoyed those days.

“Thanks. With that, I have one less regret,” Mamizu said after I finished telling her about my karaoke session.

I suddenly wondered.

Did this mean that I was responsible for erasing Mamizu's regrets in this world, just like I was doing now?

If her lingering regrets in this world disappeared one by one, what would happen to her in the end?

“Say, Mamizu.” I suddenly wanted to ask her.

“Hmm?”

“Mamizu, have you ever thought that you wanted to commit suicide?”

Mamizu's expression didn't show a single change; she replied in the exact same tone that she used in ordinary conversation. “I think about it every day.”

I was startled by the way she gave that response.

‘I think about it every day.’

I got the feeling that it wasn't a lie.

The question I asked Mamizu, I had once asked my older sister Meiko, long ago. I didn't really remember what Meiko had answered.

But after her boyfriend died, Meiko started walking around a lot.

Though I say 'walking around,' she wasn't meeting anyone somewhere or going out to enjoy herself.

She was actually just walking. But it wasn't something as simple as going for a stroll. Without any hesitation, she would go out and just continue walking for five or six hours.

Meiko had a policy for these walks. Apparently, she would start walking whenever she felt like it, without deciding on a destination, and continue walking wherever her feet took her. She didn't pace herself or rest along the way.

She died during one of these walks, at night.

After she died, I occasionally imitated her and walked like that, about once a month. Late at night, avoiding being seen by my mother, I snuck out of the house and wandered along the roads aimlessly. When I did this, I was careful to adhere to Meiko's simple method. I would walk around aimlessly, as if wandering about. On my own.

But just once, I did this together with Kayama.

It was at night during the school trip in middle school. It was apparently normal to fool around on those kinds of nights, so the people from the class hid from the teachers and enjoyed themselves. They were excited over gossip about who they liked and who was going out with who, and it wasn't the kind

of atmosphere where I could say that I was going to sleep first. Even if I tried, it would have been too noisy for me to get any sleep.

And so, as I tried to slip out of the lodging house, I ran into Kayama unexpectedly at the bottom of the stairs.

“Okada, where are you going at this time of night?” he asked.

“... I’m going somewhere.”

“I’ll go, too.”

I told Kayama no, but he followed me. I mostly ignored him as we walked. Considering that he’d followed me against my will, surprisingly enough, he didn’t try to talk to me.

On that night during the school trip, we continued walking without saying a word.

We mostly walked straight, without turning from the road. We walked, aiming for a place where nobody was around. While we were walking, I started wanting to not go back. I wanted to keep walking until I died. But I got tired and sat on the ground.

Just then, a shrine came into view, and I sat inside its grounds. Kayama bought a juice at a vending machine and threw it to me.

“You’re suffering,” Kayama said, looking at me with an exasperated expression.

“I’m normal,” I said, lifting the tab of the can and drinking all of the fizzy drink in one go. For some reason, the drink that was supposed to be sweet

tasted bitter.

“I think you’re the type who can’t go anywhere.” Kayama said those profound words.

Kind of getting the feeling that he was looking down at me, I got annoyed.

“So, are you saying *you* can go somewhere?”

“I’m different from you, Okada. I’ve risen above. Even though I’m like this, I’m enjoying myself. After my older brother died, I mean. I’ve decided to think of reality as a game. One day, we’re going to die just like that, so there’s no point in being serious about it. So even if I hurt others, I won’t be hurt,” Kayama said.

I couldn’t feel a single shred of sympathy for that response.

“I’m going to enjoy myself,” he said.

“Do as you want,” I said, fed up with this.

“So, Okada, you can just stay there, feeling troubled.” Kayama spoke as if to say, “Feel my share of troubles for me as well.”

“You’re annoying,” I said, throwing my empty can into a trash can.

That’s right, I remember.

“I sometimes want to go somewhere that isn’t here.”

That was the answer that Meiko had given me when I asked her that question.

That’s right; as Meiko said, being here in everyday life was suffocating sometimes. *Is that why?* I thought. Perhaps that was why I continued visiting Mamizu’s hospital room.

“I’ve always wanted to try making a cake,” Mamizu said one day, making yet another a request that sounded like she’d just come up with it.

But something suddenly occurred to me. From the eating challenge to persimmons, she had a lot of requests related to food. Perhaps she...

“Who are you calling greedy?” Mamizu said.

It seemed that she had become able to read my mind recently.

“Well, alright,” I said, a little startled. “I’ll make it and bring it to you.”

“Thanks... I don’t know if I can eat it all, though.” Mamizu’s expression suddenly became gloomy. It was an expression that I hadn’t really seen much recently.

“It’s fine. If there’s any left over, I’ll eat it.”

“Ah, but listen. I’m going to have a big inspection soon. Because I’ve been feeling better recently, you see. It’s possible that I can be discharged from the hospital temporarily, depending on the results,” Mamizu said.

“Then do you want to go somewhere?” I asked. “Tell me where you want to go.”

“I can’t really go that far away though. Ah, then you think about it and decide, Takuya-kun.”

“That’s different from the usual pattern.”

“It’s fine once in a while, right? I want to go somewhere you want to go, Takuya-kun. I’ll look forward to it and do my best,” Mamizu said selfishly as her expression became brighter.

I decided to make the cake in the kitchen at the maid café after work. Fortunately, cake was on the menu, I remembered how to make it and there were plenty of ingredients. The owner wasn’t around, and I thought he wouldn’t get angry if he never found out.

“What are you doing, Okada-kun?” Riko-chan-san asked as she suddenly showed up.

“Ah, I’m making a cake for personal reasons,” I said.

“Should I help?”

“No... I, cakes...”

“Are you the type who wants to make them yourself?” Riko-chan-san said, as if pouting.

I wondered what I should say. “Next time,” I said as a temporary measure.

“Next time. I’ll hold you to that, alright?” Riko-chan-san said as she went home.

“Wait, this cake, isn’t it too sweet?” said Mamizu, a wrinkle appearing between her eyebrows.

“If you’re going to say that, you don’t have to eat it,” I said.

The cake was a strawberry tart cake that wasn’t on the menu, an original that I had painstakingly made.

What did she think my effort of persevering until past eleven o’clock at night was for? I felt a little angry.

“Sorry, sorry, it’s sweet and delicious! Don’t sulk, Takuya-kun,” Mamizu said, hastily holding my hands back as I tried to take the plate away from her.

In the end, saying this and that, Mamizu ate the whole portion that I'd given her.

“Delicious, wasn’t it?” I said with a triumphant look.

“Takuya-kun, you’re a cooking genius, aren’t you!” said Mamizu.

When she went that far, it actually sounded more like a lie.

“Come to think of it, what’s your cup size, Mamizu?” I asked suddenly.

Mamizu responded with a good punch. “What do you think you’re asking all of a sudden?”

“I just wanted to know.”

“That’s private information.”

“Then what about your body weight?”

“I don’t know.”

“Blood type?”

“It’s a secret.”

“No, your blood type should be fine, right?”

“... O.”

“Foot size?”

“24.”

“So huge.”

“That’s standard, isn’t it! It’s normal!”

Mamizu got angry, so I decided to leave it at that and go home.

I got home and decided to eat the remaining cake with my mother.

“Your father doesn’t like sweet things, does he. But to think that you’d make a cake. What is it?” my mother asked.

“It’s a strawberry tart cake,” I replied as I put the cake onto plates.

My mother brought forks and quickly put a piece of cake in her mouth.

“What is this, didn’t you get the amount of sugar in the recipe wrong?” she complained with a sour look on her face.

There’s no way... I thought as I tried the cake myself.

“It’s sweet!” I thought my tongue was going to be torn off. “I’m surprised she could eat this...” I accidentally said aloud.

“She?”

“No... it’s nothing.”

Averting my eyes from my mother, I saw Kamenosuke in the water tank in the corner of the living room, yawning. *So, turtles yawn*, I thought.

“Say, Mom. Do you think Kamenosuke would eat cake?” I asked.

“He wouldn’t, would he?”

I had a feeling that he wouldn’t, but I decided to give him some to see. I split a piece of cake with my fork and tried putting it in Kamenosuke’s tank.

“Hey, don’t do that,” my mother said. “What will you do if he gets a stomach-ache?”

After we observed for a while, Kamenosuke finally showed interest in the cake.

Would he eat it?

Would he not eat it?

With a snap, Kamenosuke put the cake in his mouth.

And then he spat it out.

I was disappointed.

“It’s too sweet, after all,” my mother said as if sympathizing with Kamenosuke, and then she went to the kitchen to wash the dishes.

A short while later, when I went to Mamizu's hospital room, she had applied pink manicure to her nails for some reason.

"Oh, what's the occasion today? Is a guy you fancy coming to visit?" I asked, approaching her while keeping the thing I was holding hidden behind my back.

"That's right, Benedict Cumberbatch is coming to visit after you, Takuya-kun," she said.

"You like Benedict Cumberbatch...?" It was a taste that I couldn't understand at all.

"Ah, the same hospital room and the same view every day, it's so boring," Mamizu complained.

"Even if you say that, it can't be helped, can it?"

"Well, that's true. Ah, that's right. Hey, I feel sorry for Kamenosuke," Mamizu said suddenly. "Spending his whole life in a water tank. He's just like me. I want to show him the sea at least once," she said, sounding somewhat emotional.

Even if you say that, I thought. Her words could have been considered to be denying the very concept of pets.

"Actually, Takuya-kun, you've been hiding something behind your back this whole time. What is it?" Mamizu asked.

"Now that you mention it, this was lying on the ground over there," I said, handing her something. It was a bright-white shoebox.

“That’s the worst way in the world of giving a present to someone if you’re trying to make them happy,” she said a little angrily, as if she was actually in a bad mood. She opened the box. “No way. How, how, how?”

Mamizu took out the contents of the box and gazed at them as if she couldn’t believe her eyes.

She was holding a pair of red high heels.

They were the exact same product of the exact same brand that was in the advertisement in the magazine that she had been reading. I’d looked and found them in a department store.

“These are the ones that I really, really wanted.”

“Try them on,” I said.

“Can I?” Mamizu looked at me with slightly shy-looking, upturned eyes. Seeing her face like this was new to me.

With her heart obviously pounding, she slipped her foot into one of the high heels. Would they look good? Would they fit? Was it really alright for her to wear them? She looked as nervous as Cinderella.

“Wow, it fits perfectly. How? That’s amazing. Takuya-kun, can you read my mind?”

It wasn’t just the size; the shoe really matched Mamizu’s slender, white foot.

“I asked you your size the other day,” I said.

“Ah!” Making an expression as if she’d just remembered, Mamizu looked at me with surprised eyes. “Not bad at all, Takuya-kun.”

“I suppose.”

Mamizu put on both of the high heels and sat on the bed, swinging her legs up and down. “Ah, I want to take a purikura,” she said, gazing at the ceiling with an ecstatic expression on her face. “It’s nothing to do with the things I want to do before I die, I just want to take a purikura.” She jumped off the bed. “I was a middle-schooler when I was hospitalized. I went from a child to an adult in this hospital,” she said.

It was questionable as to whether someone in their first year of high school was an adult, but I kind of understood what she was trying to say, so I didn’t feel like interrupting her.

“I’m going to try walking around a little, okay?”

Mamizu extended her back and started walking around the hospital room with good posture. She disappeared for a moment beyond the entrance to the shared room, and when she came back, she had completely become a model in a fashion show. I couldn’t help but laugh. She put a hand on her hips and spread her legs apart a little, striking an impressive pose.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey. What do you think?” she asked.

I applauded, laughing. Mamizu gave a slightly embarrassed smile.

And then she returned to the side of the bed where I sat, and softly whispered into my ear. “I’m a D.”

Now it was my turn to be embarrassed.

Not knowing how to respond... I applauded once more. Mamizu laughed.

When I returned home, I lay down in front of Meiko's butsudan as usual and opened the leisure magazine that I'd brought back. I'd remembered that if Mamizu's inspection results were good, we'd go somewhere together. I was flipping through the pages, looking for somewhere we could make a day trip to, when my phone vibrated.

> The inspection results came out. They weren't good at all

It was a message from Mamizu.

I quietly put the magazine in the trash.

PART 5

The first floor of the hospital that Mamizu was staying in was an outpatient ward reception desk, and it was lined with benches of the faded color that was specific to public institutions. When I visited the hospital one day, I saw

Ritsu-san sitting there. As I approached to greet her, I noticed that something was strange about her.

Her face looked as if she were about to die.

The skin of her face was ashen, and her expression was stiff. When I looked closely, I saw that she was trembling. Not just her fingers or her legs; her entire body was trembling. It was a saddening sight. Retracting the “hello” that I had been planning to greet her with, I called out to her with, “Are you alright?” instead.

Ritsu turned her face, which looked as if she was having a feverish nightmare, towards me. “... Are you here to visit Mamizu today as well?”

“Did something happen?” I asked, suppressing my anxiety.

“I can’t be like this, can I?” Ritsu-san said.

Unable to respond with either “That’s right,” or “That’s not true at all,” I remained silent.

During my silence, Ritsu-san held out a paper bag that she had placed next to her. “I’m sorry, but can you give this to Mamizu?”

You can give it to her yourself, I thought for a moment, but then I took it without saying anything.

“It seems like it’s best for me to not see her right now.” Ritsu-san stood up. “Well then, I’m counting on you,” she said as she began walking towards the exit with faltering footsteps.

I blankly watched her leave and then headed towards Mamizu's hospital room. I spent the entire elevator ride pondering Ritsu-san's words. I thought about the meaning behind them, numerous times. I couldn't imagine that they meant anything good.

As I entered the room, Mamizu's eyes met mine immediately.

"I thought you might not come anymore," she said.

The light streaming in from the window faintly illuminated her contours.

She has a pretty face, I thought blankly. If Mamizu wasn't ill, I wonder what kind of life she would live. I'm sure she would always be surrounded by people, and have a far brighter personality than she does now. And maybe she wouldn't have even talked to me.

"Why?" I asked, sitting down on the stool next to the bed and crossing my legs.

"I thought you might be angry."

"About what?"

"I said that we'd go somewhere, but it didn't turn out that way."

"Why would I be angry over something like that?" I couldn't understand her way of thinking at all.

"I think about it all the time. I'm always just saying selfish things and causing you trouble. So before long, you'd get sick of me, and one day, you'd just suddenly stop coming, Takuya-kun. And that would be the end."

“That won’t happen,” I said without any deep thought, to calm her down.

“Hey, one day, if I said don’t come anymore no matter what, would you still come and see me?” Mamizu asked.

Her absurd question put me on the spot.

... She seemed to have become weak-hearted. I didn’t know whether it was because her inspection went badly or because of something else, but she seemed to have lost her presence of mind and become disheartened.

“Don’t worry about strange things like that.” To end this conversation, I handed Mamizu the paper bag that I’d been entrusted with. “I met your mother at the entrance just now. She seemed busy, and she told me to give this to you.”

“My mother isn’t really a bad person. Takuya-kun, I’m sorry about the other time. She was a gentler person in the past. She’s probably tired. Because of me, you know,” Mamizu said, taking out what was inside the paper bag. It was a pair of knitting needles and a partially-knitted piece of clothing.

“What is that?” I asked curiously.

“I started this just after I entered middle school, and then kind of got discouraged from finishing it soon after that. I suddenly remembered and thought that while I’m at it, I might as well finish these kinds of things too, so that I don’t leave anything unfinished.”

For some reason, Mamizu gazed at the incomplete mass of wool, as if at a loss for what to do. It hadn’t taken on a proper shape yet.

“Back then, I thought I’d knit a sweater, but it wouldn’t be finished in time, would it?”

“In time for what?”

“Winter. There’s no point in having knitted clothes in spring, right?” Mamizu gave a deep sigh and flopped onto her bed. And then she looked at me with depressed-looking eyes.

“Hey, what do you want to do next?” I asked, as if it were only natural for me to ask this.

“... Well, then. I want to go stargazing! I like stars,” she added in a spoiled voice, smiling as if she knew that she was asking something unreasonable.

It’s the first time I’ve heard her voice like that, I thought.

Perhaps the distance between us had shortened a little. Or perhaps it had shortened too much.

PART 6

Apparently, all human bodies glow slightly. But it’s normally so faint that it can’t be seen by the naked eye, and everyone lives their daily lives without being aware of this fact. It’s not just humans; all living creatures emit a faint light. These so-called biophotons are about one millionth of the brightness of

a star. It's thought that luminescence disease is a result of abnormalities caused by extreme imbalances in that light.

That day, I came home and pondered things alone. On my bed at night, I gazed at the ceiling and pondered.

What could I do for Mamizu?

The things that she wanted to do before she died, were those her true desires?

I'd suddenly become curious about that.

I got the feeling that, for some reason, Mamizu's emotions were steadily dying as I fulfilled her requests one after another.

Was I really doing the right thing?

It was a sleepless night. When I looked at the clock, it was already two o'clock. It had been more or less midnight when I got into bed, so that meant I'd been thinking on and on like this for a whole two hours.

I got out of bed and went downstairs. I fumbled around the pitch-black kitchen and opened the door of the refrigerator. The light that came from within was blinding. I was hungry. I rummaged around inside, looking for something to eat.

My fingers found some ham and a carbonated drink, and then I went out onto the veranda. It was a summer night; there were insects of some kind making noise.

I called Kayama, thinking that he probably wouldn't be awake at this time.

“What is it? This is unusual, Okada,” said the voice on the other end.

“Kayama, why are you awake? Hurry up and go to sleep.” I gave a strange laugh, for no reason at all.

“What’s wrong with you? … Oi, where are you now?” Kayama asked.

“The veranda of my house.”

“Second floor?”

“First floor. What are you so worried about?”

“If you’re on the first floor, then it’s fine. Have you been drinking or something?”

Hearing those words, I suddenly realized that people normally drank at times like these.

“I’m underage,” I said.

“So you haven’t ever had alcohol before?”

“It’s not that I haven’t.”

“So what are you doing at this time of night if you’re not drunk?”

“Hey, why can’t I sleep?”

“How would I know, idiot,” Kayama snorted. It was the same Kayama as always.

“Hey, Kayama. About Watarase Mamizu. Her condition isn’t good,” I told him.

“So?”

“Don’t you have to go and meet her?”

“... When I feel up for it.”

“Come to think of it, why are you ending all of your relations with women?” I asked.

“I wonder why. It’s become pointless,” Kayama said.

“It makes me anxious when you say anything that sounds remotely decent. Is there a new girl that you seriously love or something?”

“Actually, I wanted to confess to my first love. I was thinking of tidying myself up first, you see.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I’m joking.”

The call suddenly ended. I didn’t know whether Kayama had hung up on me or whether the signal had gotten bad. It wasn’t worth calling him back, so the conversation ended there.

After that, I stood there and ate the ham. *I want some mayonnaise*, I thought.

I went from the veranda back inside the house, and sat down in front of my sister’s butsudan.

Hey, Meiko.

When the ones we love die, we must commit suicide.

I still haven't told anyone that secret.

I'm keeping my promise.

I heard a rustling sound. I turned to see that Kamenosuke was staying up late as well; he had escaped from his water tank and was going for a stroll across the floor of the living room. I hastily caught him and put him back in his tank.

Looking at Kamenosuke, I got the feeling that maybe all human struggles were pointless.

I thought that I'd be able to sleep well after that, but that wasn't the case. Even after I returned to my room, I couldn't sleep for a while.

“Ah...”

My voice escaped my lips. I tossed and turned in my bed numerous times, letting out several low groans. Stirring with aimless thoughts that floated into my mind only to disappear again, I slept.

When I went to school the next day, Mamizu was in the classroom. She was in the seat next to mine.

“Good morning, Takuya-kun,” she said.

I was quite surprised. “W-what happened, Mamizu!”

“My luminescence disease is completely cured. The doctor said that it was a miraculous recovery.”

Now that she mentioned it, the color of Mamizu’s face looked quite a bit healthier.

“Here, look,” she said, jumping up and down. “I could even fly through the sky now.”

“I see. That’s good.”

I’m really glad, I thought. Mamizu has gotten better.

“We can start our school life together now, can’t we? Treat me well, Takuya-kun.”

I became happy. *So things like this do occur in this world,* I thought. A miracle had happened.

Mamizu and I ate lunch together. Mamizu laughed happily, looking as if she was enjoying herself.

“Let’s go somewhere together,” she said.

For some reason, my heart began thumping. “Is that a date?” I asked.

“You dummy,” Mamizu said, giving an embarrassed laugh.

The two of us talked about where we would go on the weekend. Let's go here, let's go there, our imaginations were endless. I thought that I would enjoy going anywhere as long as I was with Mamizu.

But... I knew. I started to gradually notice.

I knew that such convenient events would never be waiting for us.

Something like this couldn't happen. This wasn't something that was happening in reality. While I was talking with Mamizu, I became aware of this.

“What's wrong, Takuya-kun?” Mamizu asked, looking at me curiously.
“Why are you crying?”

I didn't know why, but I couldn't help but to cry.

That's when I woke up. Of course, it had been a dream. It had become morning outside before I knew it. My body had been drained of its strength. I couldn't move at all.

I was crying not only in my dream, but in reality as well.

Even though I had woken up, my tears wouldn't stop.

Mamizu would die one day.

What would I do when that happened?

What would I do until that happened?

Now that I think about it, stargazing is something that can be done even from a hospital, right? I thought. The problem was that the visiting hours at the hospital Mamizu stayed in ended at eight o'clock. Since it was summer, the sky was still quite bright at eight o'clock; it wasn't really a period of time when you could feel like you were stargazing.

So, I decided to sneak into the hospital after visiting hours.

Late at night, once the lights were out, nobody was at the hospital other than the people on duty. I entered through the emergency exit, climbed the emergency stairs while keeping my footsteps quiet, and headed for Mamizu's room. I was holding a telescope in my hands. It wasn't that professional, but with that said, it had cost me 40,000 yen at the department store. I had spent most of the pay from my part-time job on this, but it didn't bother me.

I entered the corridor from the emergency stairs and quietly made my way through. It was game over if I was found by a nurse. But things went fine. Proceeding with careful footsteps, I arrived at Mamizu's shared room. I quietly approached Mamizu's bed and shook her awake. Mamizu opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“Takuya-kun, why are you here?” she asked.

“Quiet. We’re going to the roof now,” I whispered.

“Now...?”

Mamizu was still half-asleep, but when I showed her the telescope that I was holding, a look of comprehension finally appeared on her face.

“You didn’t have to go that far... Wait, I’ll get up properly now.”

Mamizu slowly stood up, and with me supporting her body, we headed for the hospital’s roof. Unlike the roofs of schools and such, it was open. It was probably because it was convenient for drying laundry. There were clotheslines everywhere. There was a plastic bench towards the corner. I sat Mamizu down on it.

“This is my first time using one of these, too,” I said. Of course, I’d never done anything like stargazing before; I strained my eyes to read the instructions in the darkness and started setting up the telescope next to Mamizu.

Mamizu gave a quiet scream. “Oh no.”

Surprised, I turned around.

I was taken aback.

Sometimes, there were moments when I forgot that Mamizu had luminescence disease. There were even times when we were alone together like this that I wondered whether Mamizu being sick was all a lie. But that was definitely not true.

Mamizu's body was emitting a dim, faint, pale light. The bare skin poking out of the long sleeves of her pajamas were glowing a fluorescent white. That was... the characteristic symptom of the condition known as luminescence disease. I looked up to see the moon shining brilliantly in the clear sky. When Mamizu's body was illuminated by the moon's light, it glowed. That was the distinct feature of the disease that she suffered from.

"It's embarrassing, so don't look," Mamizu said, as if begging me. But I couldn't think of Mamizu's appearance as anything to be embarrassed about.

"Sorry," I said, apologizing. After I apologized, I gave her my honest impression. "Sorry. But you're beautiful, Mamizu."

She really was. On this rooftop on this night, Mamizu's fleeting life was shining, as though she were a firefly.

"I was careless. I shouldn't have come to the roof with you." For some reason, it seemed that Mamizu was shocked at being seen like this by me. "It puts you off, doesn't it, Takuya-kun?"

How could I convey to Mamizu that this wasn't the case at all?

"I'm like a monster or a ghost, aren't I?"

It seemed that Mamizu felt something like a complex about her body that glowed due to her luminescence disease.

"You're you, Mamizu." That was all I managed to say in the end, and then I finished setting up the telescope.

I peeked through it to make sure it was working. I could see the stars properly. *Not bad for an amateur*, I thought.

“The weather is good today, so you can see clearly,” I said, gesturing for Mamizu to take a look.

Looking timid for some reason, Mamizu peered into the telescope.

“... Wow, you’re right,” she said.

Mamizu was completely drawn into the world inside the telescope. Her reaction was like that of a child seeing a kaleidoscope for the first time. Her voice was filled with genuine surprise, as though she was amazed that there really were such beautiful things in this world. Hearing her voice like that, I felt satisfied.

“Say, Takuya-kun, do you have a girlfriend?” Mamizu asked, without taking her eyes off the telescope.

“If I did... I wouldn’t come to see you all the time like this, would I?” I said.

“I suppose that’s true. Well then, even if you don’t have a girlfriend, don’t you have someone you like?” Mamizu continued, turning back towards me and looking at me with a serious expression.

“I’m kind of scared,” I said, without looking into her eyes.

“Scared of liking someone?”

I couldn’t give a reply to that question. Meiko’s face suddenly flashed into my mind. As if shaking off that dark image, I shook my head lightly.

“I’m not popular,” I said vaguely instead.

“I don’t think that’s true.” Mamizu suddenly took two, three smooth steps towards me and lightly held my arm. She had cornered me at this distance completely in a rather spectacular fashion. “Shall we try a rehearsal? So that you can get a girlfriend, Takuya-kun.”

“I don’t need it,” I said, a bitter smile almost appearing on my face.

“I wanted to try it. Please, just for five minutes,” Mamizu said, and then she pulled me next to the telescope.

“Is that another one of the things you want to do before you die?”

Mamizu didn’t reply; instead, she gestured for me to sit next to her and look through the telescope.

The sky suddenly filled my vision. Just like when I’d peered into a microscope during a physics experiment once, the scale of the world changed in an instant, and the stars that had been small and distant were now visible in detail. Although this was a telescope that I’d bought myself, it was a sight that I was seeing for the first time.

Perhaps looking at the night sky like this was another thing that I never would have done in my entire life if I hadn’t met Mamizu.

“Try saying something romantic.” Mamizu’s voice came from outside my vision, as if through telepathy.

“Huh? I can’t,” I said.

“A summer night, stargazing, an attractive person of the opposite sex beside you – all the things you need in order to be romantic are gathered here, aren’t they?”

“You’d say that about yourself?”

“... It’s not really true.”

I was really troubled by this task. I searched the memories in my head, but no particular words came to mind. I’d hardly seen any romance movies at all.

“Something like, ‘I want to be with you forever?’”

I turned to look at Mamizu’s face and saw that she was making an expression as if to say that this didn’t click.

“I love you from the bottom of my heart?”

“Don’t say ‘from the bottom of my heart’ like you don’t care!”

“I wouldn’t mind dying if it’s for your sake.”

“Hey, are you motivated about this at all?”

“Isn’t this unfair?” I said, unable to endure this any longer. “I don’t think it’s fair to make me do this on my own while you throw in your quips.”

Mamizu tilted her head a little as if to say, “So what should we do?”

“I might feel more motivated if you say these with me.”

Say them if you can, I thought.

“... Alright,” Mamizu said, moving so that she was sitting half a step closer, basically clinging to me.

I jumped a little, but maybe because I was a little irritated, I stayed there without pulling myself away.

“It’s like the two of us are alone in the world, isn’t it?” Mamizu said, looking around the rooftop. It was late at night, and there wasn’t a single sign of anyone being around.

“If that was true, what would you want to do?” I asked.

“Then I’d have no choice but to marry you, would I, Takuya-kun?”

“What do you mean, ‘have no choice?’”

Ignoring my protest, Mamizu gave me a profound-sounding laugh. “Try proposing to me,” she said with a somewhat intimate, over-familiar smile.

“In sickness and in health, I will love you, help you and devote myself to you.”

“I’ll love you forever, too, Takuya-kun.”

Mamizu looked at me.

I looked back at her.

“I’m joking, you know?” she said, as if making sure that I knew.

“How funny,” I replied, without cracking a smile.

And then Mamizu extended a hand towards the night sky as if to grasp it.
“Hey, I wonder if even those pretty stars have lifespans.”

She sounded like she already knew the answer.

I turned the telescope towards the southern sky. Recalling the basic astronomy that we were taught in class, I looked for a certain star.

“The stars that shine red are close to the ends of their lifespans. The famous one is Antares, in the Scorpius constellation. In the end, they’ll burn out and die.” I aligned the telescope and let Mamizu have a look.

“I wonder if all of the stars in the night sky will turn red one day,” Mamizu sighed.

I tried to imagine it, but I couldn’t picture it very well.

“What happens when stars die?” Mamizu asked.

“They lose their light and become something like corpses. Or they become black holes.”

When heavy stars die, they collapse under gravity and become black holes. No matter, not even light, can escape being sucked in. Black holes grow by absorbing and combining with all kinds of stars, becoming enormous.

“I wonder if humans get sucked in by dead people as well?” Mamizu said.

Startled by these words, I turned back towards Mamizu.

“I don’t want to become a black hole,” she said in a terribly emotional tone.

Nobody does, I thought, but I didn't say it out loud.

Antares was clearly visible, even with the naked eye. The heart of the Scorpius constellation. Now that I thought about it, that scorpion had wanted to become a star illuminating the night sky for the sake of someone else's happiness, right?

I actually wanted to die like that, too.

"If all the stars became black holes, it would be boring to do something like stargazing, wouldn't it?" Mamizu said.

"I think the earth will be destroyed before that happens, though."

Earth's final day. Like in science-fiction.

"What will happen to the universe in the end?"

"It'll end, probably."

That's what had been written in a book that I'd read in the library while killing time in the past. The universe would come to an end. Just like human lives.

"Then I wonder just what kind of meaning there is behind the existence of this world?"

"There is no meaning. Any meaning to it is a human misconception," I said.

There was no meaning to living.

There wasn't a single shred of meaning to anything. Entropy would increase, and the universe would head towards its heat death. Everything would be annihilated, and only silence would remain. Nothing would survive. History and language would disappear, too.

The universe formed through a sudden explosion, and during its cooling process, animals with consciousness flowing through their brains came into existence spontaneously. Now, we wandered and lived our pointless lives in search of meaning, and honestly speaking, all of it was painful for me.

“What part of that is supposed to be romantic?” Mamizu stuck her lips out a little as if pouting, and then her eyes returned to the telescope.

And then we became silent.

It might have been the first time we'd spent time together in silence like this.

Silence sometimes makes one lose their sense of reality. This was one of those times. Maybe it was because we'd been talking about stars and the universe. The world's scale had changed, and I felt like we were nothing more than microbes.

Now that our conversation had stopped, Mamizu seemed to be completely absorbed in stargazing. “Beautiful, aren't they... they really are.”

She had been completely drawn into the world within the telescope.

There was something I was thinking about as I was looking at her defenseless back. Like light spilling from a window through gaps in the curtains, her skin was peeking out through the gaps in her long hair, glowing white.

“Mamizu, I love you,” I said.

Mamizu didn’t turn to face me. She stayed completely still, showing no response, as though I hadn’t said anything at all.

“Five minutes have passed already,” she said. Her voice was trembling a little.

I couldn’t see her expression. As usual, I didn’t know what she was thinking.

“I’m not joking,” I said in a serious tone.

A few moments of silence passed.

I waited.

“I’m sorry.”

For some reason, there were tears in Mamizu’s voice.



Bonus: Here is an illustration from the illustrator's pixiv profile.

CHAPTER 3:

YOU ARE JULIET

At our high school, it was decided that the first-years would put on a play for the cultural festival. What we would be doing had already been decided by vote.

Romeo and Juliet.

Isn't it too cliché? I thought.

And then we had to decide on the cast.

“First of all, the role of Juliet. I was thinking that we'd nominate candidates, then have a show of hands to vote,” said our homeroom teacher, Yoshiie-sensei.

She was wearing a light expression; it didn't seem that she was dragging out the issue with Kayama. It was possible that Kayama had chosen his timing so that she could get her feelings in order over the summer vacation.

I looked around, but there was an air of avoidance among everyone. Our school was quite focused on preparing students for university, so there were a

lot of people attending cram schools even among first-years, so the people who participated in events like this were in the minority. Supporting roles might have been fine, but main roles with many lines that needed a lot of practice were the most unpopular. This applied for every class, not just ours. Apparently, it was common for the teacher to just choose people.

“There aren’t any candidates, are there...” Yoshie-sensei said, sounding disappointed.

I took a moment to take a deep breath, harden my resolve and then raised my hand with all of my strength.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

The whole classroom exploded with roars of laughter at that moment. But I certainly hadn’t raised my hand to make people laugh.

“You know we’re talking about the Juliet role, right?” Yoshie-sensei said.
“You’re a guy, aren’t you, Okada-kun?”

“I’ve always been interested in wearing women’s clothes,” I said.

More laughter echoed in the classroom.

“You can’t. Aren’t there any girls who want to do it?” Yoshie-sensei curtly rejected my statement and pressed the other students. Even so, nobody raised their hand. It was clear that nobody wanted to do it. And then someone said it.

“But maybe it would actually be more popular if a guy did it.”

That opinion triggered voices of approval with responses like, “You’re right,” “It’ll be hilarious,” and, “It’ll work, won’t it?”

Finally, Yoshie-sensei partially gave in. “Hmm... I’m against it, though. Well, in the end, it’s up to the students to decide. Well then, everyone in favor of Okada-kun in the role of Juliet, raise your hands.”

A few scattered hands went up across the classroom, and their number steadily increased. At a glance, it looked like more than two thirds of the class had raised their hands.

“Well then, we’ll give Okada-kun this role for now. But if a girl wants to take the role later, she will get it. That’s fine, right?”

I couldn’t imagine that anyone else would come forward, but Yoshie-sensei’s words settled the matter.

“Next, the role of Romeo. Well then, shall we make this one a girl?” Yoshie-sensei said, probably joking.

But nobody raised their hands. Finally, Yoshie-sensei looked around the classroom with a troubled expression.

And then Kayama raised his hand. “Well then, I’ll do it.”

“I-I see. Then, I suppose I’ll leave it to you, Kayama-kun.” Yoshie-sensei looked surprised, but she wrote our names on the blackboard.

Romeo: Kayama Akira

Juliet: Okada Takuya

What a terrible cast, I thought as I looked at the letters on the blackboard.

“Kayama, why did you raise your hand?” I asked him after homeroom was finished.

“Because I want to stand out,” he replied calmly.

“I was sure you just wanted to cause trouble for Yoshie-sensei,” I said.

“You’re overthinking things. And actually, you being Juliet is stranger than my problems. What on earth is that about? You’ve changed much more than I have.”

“... I have my own circumstances, too.”

Well, I wasn’t normally the type to participate in school events. I didn’t think Kayama’s reaction was unreasonable.

After homeroom was sixth period, PE.

In most PE lessons, Kayama just watched. Kayama was watching from the corner of the basketball court on that day as well. After being put in the same class as him, I was always nervous during PE lessons. But the one thing that made me the most nervous was basketball.

The ball was passed to me. I wondered whether I should dribble or shoot. At that moment, Kayama suddenly entered my field of vision. In the next

moment, the ball was taken from me by someone on the opposite team.

“You’re so clumsy, Juliet!” Kayama shouted at me, sounding a little angry. I could hear chuckling laughter around me.

I looked behind me to see the match proceeding, and a goal was easily scored against my team. As I was thinking that it might be my fault for not getting back into position right away, a loss pass flew towards me from my teammate. I heard him shout.

“Juliet Okada!”

It sounded like the stage name of an unsuccessful comedian. With a sigh, I jumped and threw a shot.

The ball flew through the air in an arc and fell into the net.

Surprised, I looked at Kayama. Our eyes met.

“What?” Kayama said, sounding irritated.

I stood stock still, unable to say anything. Why had I looked at Kayama now, after scoring a goal? I regretted that a little.

In the past, Kayama had been a basketball player.

Up until a certain point during our second year of middle school.

Kayama and I were in the same class back then. And during that time, I was being bullied by a certain group of delinquents in the class who had their eyes on me.

“Jump, Okada!” one of the delinquents shouted.

I was holding the handrail of a veranda, facing our classroom.

“If you hurry up and die, it’ll make us all happier, too.”

It had all begun when I covered for another guy who was being bullied. I wasn’t good at fighting myself, and I had no way of winning a fight, but I couldn’t help myself when I saw that guy having the contents of his bento thrown over his head.

On the veranda, I laughed at myself for having done something so stupid. For some reason, the guy who had been bullied back then had joined the group that was bullying me now. I didn’t understand. Was he doing this to escape the fear that he might be the one to be bullied again one day?

“Die! Die!”

It seemed that everyone in the class was pretending not to see the bullying that was targeted at me. That was to be expected; I was living proof that anyone trying to stop it would become the new target.

There are several forms of bullying; there are malicious ones like verbal abuse and harassment, but the bullying I faced was direct violence, being punched and kicked. At that moment, I’d become tired of that violence.

When I looked at the ground below me from that veranda, I felt like I was going to be sucked in. *Maybe dying would be fine*, I thought. I didn't really understand, but there were a lot of troublesome things about being alive. When I thought about it, I hadn't particularly enjoyed anything while living.

“Alright,” I said quickly, climbing over the veranda’s handrail.

Holding the handrail behind me, I placed my feet on the edge of the veranda, where there was only enough room to fit half of my sneakers, and looked down. I looked back and saw my classmates looking at me with blank expressions through the open window. They were looking, but showing no particular response. I felt like things being like this was good in its own way, so that I wouldn't have to become like them.

I looked down once more.

The wind was blowing.

I remembered Meiko, who had died a year ago.

Dying is simple, I thought.

But my legs were shaking.

I couldn't really make up my mind.

That was when it happened.

“Oi, class is starting soon.”

Kayama opened the door to the veranda and approached me.

Surprised, I turned around.

“Shut up, you. Get back.”

Ignoring the delinquents’ words as if he hadn’t heard them at all, Kayama got closer to me.

I’d never even had a proper conversation with Kayama before that. The only thing I knew about him was that he was in the basketball club.

But, with that said, the two of us did have a certain connection.

Kayama Masataka.

Kayama’s dead older brother had been Meiko’s boyfriend. Our siblings had been in a relationship with each other, so we had to acknowledge each other’s existence whether we liked it or not. That didn’t mean that we’d had any deep conversations about it or anything like that, but our eyes met from time to time.

But that was all our relationship came down to. Up until then.

“You guys are boring,” Kayama said in a clear voice.

I was completely surprised. Concealing that surprise, I spoke to Kayama in a calm voice.

“Leave me alone.”

“Let me join you,” Kayama said, lightly grabbing my shoulder.

With that, Kayama did a high jump over the handrail and stood next to me.

“Have you gone crazy?” one of the delinquents shouted.

“Okada has a hundred times the courage you guys have,” Kayama said, and then he let go of the handrail. With his free hands, he started clapping in a rhythm. “Well, I’m braver than him, though.”

And then, on tiptoes, Kayama began stepping around on the half-footstep’s worth of space outside the handrail, as if dancing to the rhythm of his clapping.

I couldn’t believe it.

Everyone there stared at Kayama dumbfoundedly. Everyone had been sucked into his atmosphere.

This was Kayama’s solo stage.

It looked as if Kayama didn’t fear death at all. He danced, skillfully and lightly.

He’s gone mad.

He’s crazy.

Something’s wrong with his head.

That was what I thought.

“What do you think!” Kayama turned towards me with a triumphant expression, full of confidence.

And then he let himself fall.

This time, I didn't even have time to be surprised.

I reached my hand out, but it didn't reach him.

As I stared at Kayama in a daze, he was in the air.

He managed to land on his feet, but then he lay on the ground, clutching his legs. Even from the second floor, I could see that his face was twisted in pain. There was a scream from below.

“Oi, someone call an ambulance!” I heard someone shouting.

Panicking, the delinquents scattered.

Only I was left on the veranda.

I was shaking.

And then I couldn't help but laugh.

Kayama, who should have been suffering with pain, had smiled at me and given me a thumbs up for some reason.

Don't act so cool.

But you really are cool, I thought honestly.

It would have been fine if the story ended there, but reality was a little crueler than that. Kayama had suffered compound fractures in his legs. He went through strenuous rehabilitation after that, and recovered to the point that the injury no longer affected his daily life, but the doctor told him that it would be best to stop participating in physically-demanding sports.

As if as an afterthought, Kayama told me later, “My legs won’t perform even if I continue with sports.” And so, he quit basketball. Apparently, as a tall person with good reflexes, he had been an ace player, and the basketball club had placed high expectations on him.

I actually hadn’t directly said a single thing to Kayama about this.

I’d never said sorry, thanks for doing that for my sake, or anything like that.

But I did once ask him why he’d done such a crazy thing.

“I kind of got the feeling that if you jumped, you’d have really died, Okada. Even from the second floor, if you landed badly, you’d probably die. And I sort of felt like you wanted to die. But I felt like if I jumped, I wouldn’t die. I’m immortal, you see. Ah, but I also thought that things wouldn’t calm down if I didn’t do it. I’m bad at fighting, you know. The bullying stopped completely, so things turned out alright in the end, didn’t they?”

I didn’t understand what Kayama was thinking even after hearing this explanation, though.

Occasionally, Kayama was a guy who said and did crazy things that ordinary people couldn’t understand.

But after that, though I said various things about him, I had a slight respect towards Kayama, and what he did that day was why he was my savior.

As I walked along a corridor during lunch break, I came across Kayama, who was talking to a girl from another class. As I tried to pass by, pretending that I hadn't noticed, the girl suddenly gave Kayama a slap in the face. All of the other students in the corridor turned around to see what was going on.

"Someone like you should just go and die," the girl said, and then she hurriedly walked away down the corridor. She was a pretty girl.

Kayama had a somewhat refreshed expression on his face. Noticing me, he smiled. I had no idea why he would smile at a time like this.

"Come along with me for a bit," he said, walking towards the emergency stairs at the back of the corridor. Having no choice, I followed him.

The wind was blowing strongly on the landing of the emergency stairs. Kayama sat on one of the stairs and looked up at the sky.

"With that, I'm finally finished with all of them," he said.

"Cutting your relationships with women?" I asked.

"Yeah. Ah man, I'm tired," he said emotionally, rubbing the cheek that had been slapped earlier.

"Say, Kayama, why are you doing something like that?"

"Hmm... I've gotten bored of my game. I mean, there's no game that you don't get bored of, is there?"

A self-centered way to say things as always, I thought. It would have been unbearable for the people who had gone out with him.

“Say, Okada. Do you think life can be started over again?” Kayama asked.

“It’s impossible,” I replied immediately.

“I had a dream,” Kayama said with his eyes closed, as if recalling something. “It was a dream where I traveled back in time to before my older brother died and relived my whole life from the beginning.” And then he suddenly gave a wordless shout as he stood up. “I think I’m going to go and see Watarase Mamizu.”

Has Kayama been cutting his relationships with women for that purpose? I wondered. As I realized what that would mean, I felt startled, but before I could confirm it with Kayama, he walked off, leaving me behind.

Somehow, I felt really shocked.

A short while after summer vacation ended, Mamizu was transferred from the shared room to a private one. Apparently, it wasn’t unrelated to the results of the inspection she had earlier. Little by little, she was growing thinner, and her face had become visibly paler.

Mamizu hadn’t told me the meaning behind the “I’m sorry” when I confessed to her the other day, and I hadn’t asked. This was because I kind of understood even without asking or having her explain, and I felt like it would be extremely difficult to put it into words.

“I was told how much longer I have to live again today,” Mamizu said.

Apparently, her condition wasn’t very good these days. She could feel it in her skin.

“He’s a useless doctor, right? He’s going to be wrong again anyway,” I said, with a sense of desire in my words.

“Maybe... who knows?” Mamizu’s voice sounded a little helpless. Her expression was different from how it was when we first met. “Do you want to know how many months I have left?”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

That was how I honestly felt. It wasn’t like I could do anything about it by knowing. I might have wanted to know if it were my lifespan in question, but I didn’t want to hear about Mamizu’s. *Maybe I’m a more weak-hearted person than I thought.* A bitter smile almost appeared on my face.

“I managed to get the Juliet role,” I said.

No, that’s right. There was just one thing that I could do. Doing the things on Mamizu’s list of ‘things she wanted to do before she died,’ one by one, and crossing them off.

“Really? It was worth the try, wasn’t it!” Mamizu exclaimed.

Of course, that had been something that Mamizu had requested. When I told her that the class’s project for the cultural festival was Romeo and Juliet, Mamizu had said that she wanted to be a part of it. I had replied, “Alright,” before Mamizu could even say anything further.

“Well, about the next ‘thing I want to do before I die,’” Mamizu said, handing me the paperback book that she was holding. “I want to visit the grave of the author that I like.”

I looked at the cover of the paperback book that I’d been handed. The author was Shizusawa Sou, and the title was, ‘One Ray of Light.’ I opened the book to see that the contents were written in old-fashioned language; it felt like a really old piece of literature. This was the book that Mamizu was always reading.

“This is the writer that I like the most,” Mamizu said. “I wanted visit his grave no matter what, but...”

“Alright.”

I’d probably get the information I needed with enough Googling. I didn’t know where it was, but I decided to make the promise that I’d do it first.

“Takuya-kun. Really, thank you for everything,” Mamizu said in an admiring tone.

“What are you saying? It’s unpleasant.” Her words didn’t make me happy at all. “You sound like you’re going to die tomorrow.”

The words slipped from my mouth. *Damn it*, I thought, the moment I spoke them. Because Mamizu’s expression had suddenly changed.

“It’s alright. You don’t have to worry, it’ll be alright,” Mamizu said, as if comforting a child.

I had no idea what was supposed to be alright.

PART 2

Shizusawa Sou was an autobiographical writer from before the war. He wasn't very well-known to the public, but apparently, he had some loyal fans.

His most notable work, 'One Ray of Light,' was known as a typical piece of sanatorium literature. Sanatorium literature refers to works depicting the lives of patients hospitalized in sanatoriums. 'One Ray of Light' depicted the life of a protagonist who suffered from luminescence disease. Shizusawa Sou was an autobiographical writer, and autobiographies are generally stories written based on actual experiences. Shizusawa Sou himself had suffered from luminescence disease and died in his twenties.

I couldn't quite get a grasp on the image his work portrayed just from this description on the internet, so I decided to actually borrow the book from Mamizu and read it.

While I was reading 'One Ray of Light' at my own seat between classes, Kayama called out to me.

"What are you reading that for?" he asked.

"Ah, it's just..."

It was an old book; its literary style and metaphors were old-fashioned, so it took me quite a while to read through it. Honestly, it was such a minor work, and I would never have picked it up in my life if Mamizu hadn't been reading it.

“That’s the book that Watarase Mamizu likes, isn’t it?”

I was startled.

Did Kayama know something?

“Oh, really?” I played dumb. *Isn’t this a really obvious way to play dumb?* I thought.

“I like it too, actually,” Kayama said.

This was an unexpected fact. Or rather, I couldn’t imagine that it was a coincidence. I would have understood if it were a famous novel, but it was no coincidence that Kayama liked an obscure book like this.

“I haven’t finished reading it yet, so don’t spoil it,” I said.

“He dies in the end,” Kayama said, spoiling the story immediately.

But even I knew that much of the ending, so I didn’t feel like getting angry.

‘One Ray of Light’ wasn’t that long a book. It wasn’t even two hundred pages in paperback form. I finished reading it within the day. Honestly speaking, I didn’t find it particularly interesting. Well, there were interesting parts, but the story seemed to have few redeeming features in my eyes. Maybe that was because it was a work where an autobiographer knew that he was dying and depicted what he thought his own death was going to be like. It was melancholic and induced a dark mood.

The next day, we had an educational field trip. It had been decided that our class would go to the folklore museum. I could kind of imagine what the

folklore museum would be like, but not quite. What kind of things would be on display? Earthenware? Bears?

It was at nine o'clock in the morning, just after I got past the ticket gate at the station near the museum we were supposed to be meeting at. I'd arrived early, but I encountered Kayama, who had arrived even earlier. Almost none of the other students had arrived yet.

"Hey, shall we skip out on this?" Kayama suggested. Of course Kayama would be the one to suggest something like this.

I decided to join him, because I didn't have much interest in the origins of the people of our hometown.

"I want to visit Shizusawa Sou's grave," I said.

Kayama looked a little taken aback, but he quickly regained his composure. "Well then, let's go," he said. "We're leaving early," he said to one of our classmates, who stared at him blankly.

We went through the ticket gate and got on the train. I looked on the internet to find that Shizusawa Sou's grave was deep in the mountains at the prefectural border. It would take about an hour and a half by train to get there, but then we'd have to climb a mountain after that.

"Kayama, can you climb mountains?" I asked, worrying about his legs.

"Well, I'll manage. If I can't, you'll carry me anyway, Okada," Kayama said in a tone that made it hard to tell whether he was serious or joking.

Our conversation stopped there.

Rush hour had passed, so there were few people inside the train and, it was quiet.

Now that I thought about it, the two of us had never gone out somewhere together. We hadn't even established hobbies or topics of conversation that we might have in common. I couldn't imagine that we'd have a lively conversation during our journey.

“About Watarase Mamizu,” Kayama said.

No, that's right. That was the single topic of conversation we had in common.

“I liked her,” Kayama said briefly.

“I know,” I said, not playing dumb this time.

“I guess you do,” Kayama said, not playing dumb either.

And then, Kayama began telling me why he had come to like Mamizu.

The first time Kayama met Mamizu was in the gathering place for the entrance exams for middle school.

Our school was a private combined middle and high school, so those entrance exams were considered to be quite difficult. Apparently, Kayama was running a high fever due to influenza at the time. He had a fever on the very day of the exams. Despite being nervous, Kayama managed to take the

exams. But his mind was hazy and he was unsteady on his feet. On top of that, he had terrible nausea. Despite having managed to endure during the exams, he apparently ran to the toilet and vomited during the breaks in between.

When Kayama returned to the classroom for the next examination, he was at his limit. His legs gave out and he collapsed onto the floor. That was when Mamizu rushed over to him.

“Are you alright?”

Kayama said that she'd looked like an angel as she called out to him.

“Let’s go to the infirmary. I’ll follow you there,” Mamizu said gently.

“No. I want to take the exams no matter what,” Kayama replied.

“Well then… let’s do our best. Let’s take these exams together and make absolutely sure to meet at the entrance ceremony.”

Apparently, Kayama was touched by her strong words of “make absolutely sure” instead of “I’m sure we will” or “I hope I see you there.” And Kayama did his best in the entrance exams, encouraged by those words.

And apparently, Kayama thought that he wanted to become someone who would help others in their time of need, just like her.

Kayama saw Mamizu at the entrance ceremony. But she was in a different class. The two of them didn’t make contact with each other. After that, Mamizu had always been on Kayama’s mind.

He somehow managed to gather his courage and go to talk to her, but that was when Mamizu stopped coming to school. Kayama heard rumors that her body was in poor condition due to unknown causes. Apparently, during her last day at school, she had been reading 'One Ray of Light' alone in the library. She seemed to have been absorbed into the world within the book, and didn't notice Kayama's gaze. Watching her from afar like that was the last time Kayama saw her.

After that, Kayama awaited the day that Mamizu would return to school, but that day never came.

During the first homeroom of our first year in high school, when it was decided that someone should visit Watarase Mamizu's hospital room, he'd thought that this was his chance. But he felt that he was too dirty to meet Watarase Mamizu back then. And so, he decided to have me check things out instead.

He wanted me to create some common ground for the day when he eventually went to visit her himself.

Kayama revealed all of this to me.

Shizusawa Sou's grave was in quite a remote place. This was possibly a reflection of the misanthropic, eccentric personality he had while he was alive, just like the character in his book.

“This is quite tough.” Beads of sweat had formed on Kayama’s forehead.

I was a little worried about him, but I couldn’t say, “Shall we go back?” Exchanging few words, we continued walking.

And then we finally arrived at Shizusawa Sou’s grave.

“It’s kind of… is this the right place? It’s a lonely grave, isn’t it?” Kayama complained.

Maybe graves are lonely things to begin with, but even so, just as Kayama said, this grave was a very lonely sight. It was different from an ordinary graveyard; there weren’t any graves of anyone else. There was only a single grave, standing there alone. It was covered in mold and moss, and it had been significantly weathered. There weren’t any signs that anyone had visited it. It was difficult to imagine that this was the grave of someone who had attained a certain degree of success as an author. It was said that Shizusawa Sou had no relatives at the time of his death.

The characteristic feature of the grave was that his name wasn’t written on the gravestone. Neither his pen name nor his real name was written on it. Only a single character had been carved into it.

無^[5]

That was Shizusawa Sou’s epitaph. Of course, I’d looked up information on the internet beforehand, so I’d known this, and this was unmistakably Shizusawa Sou’s grave, but looking at the real thing, I got the impression that it was quite an eccentric grave.

“‘無,’ huh. What a strange grave,” Kayama said, frankly speaking his mind.

Apparently, this strange grave had been made in accordance with Shizusawa Sou's will. Supposedly, when someone asked him the meaning behind it while he was alive, he'd replied with a single sentence: "That is my view of life." This had been written on the internet.

Indeed, when humans die, they become nothing. They don't go to heaven or anywhere else. Nothing remains afterwards.

That is probably the truth.

I took out my phone and took a few photos to show Mamizu.

We went down the path we came and descended the mountain.

"... I'm going to confess to Watarase Mamizu," Kayama said to me in a serious tone while we were riding the train back.

'I like Watarase Mamizu, too. I confessed. But she rejected me.'

I couldn't say those simple words to Kayama.

"Let's go visit Mamizu together next time," I suggested to him instead.

PART 3

When I went to Mamizu's hospital room a few days later, she was working on the knitted item from before.

“I’ve brought one more person with me today,” I said.

Mamizu’s hands stopped knitting and she made a puzzled expression. “Who is it?”

Kayama entered the room from behind me. Even from here, I could see that he was nervous.

“Do you remember me?” he asked.

“Umm... Ah, I remember! If I recall, you’re the person I met at the entrance exam, right?” Mamizu said, sounding surprised.

“I’m happy that you remembered me. My name is Kayama Akira.”

“Well then, I can call you Akira-kun.”

Kayama turned to face me. “Hey, Okada. Would you mind leaving us alone for a little bit?” he said hesitantly.

“Yeah... Alright.”

I quietly left Mamizu’s room. I sat on a bench in the corridor and looked up at the ceiling, bored. During the day, nurses walked back and forth busily up and down the corridors.

Kayama is probably confessing to Mamizu now, I thought.

Of course, I didn’t have the right to stop him.

Even so, there was a kind of gloomy feeling lingering in my mind.

What was this? Jealousy? I felt like smiling bitterly at this pathetic emotion inside me.

And then I thought about the meaning behind Mamizu's "I'm sorry." *I've already been rejected. Even though I've been rejected, I still love Mamizu, so it can't be helped,* I thought.

I looked at the clock and saw that only five minutes had passed.

I felt like time spent waiting was long. Time didn't flow evenly; different periods of five minutes could feel long or short. I felt like the time I spent with Mamizu was short. Time that was precious was short, while time that I didn't care about was long. *Why isn't it the opposite?* I wondered.

I closed my eyes and faced the ceiling. For some reason, my heart was beating fast. *What good does it do me to be nervous?* I thought.

I heard the sound of the hospital room's door being thrown open violently. I turned around to see Kayama.

"Hey, Kayama..." I began. The moment I followed up with the usual "you're an idiot," I regretted it.

Kayama wasn't in a state for me to call out to him.

He stared back at me, his face ashen, hollow and expressionless. The word 'dumbfounded' came to mind. It was like I was looking at someone else who wasn't Kayama. I had the feeling that I'd never seen such a powerless expression on his face before.

He stayed silent.

Confused, I just looked back at him.

“It’s so frustrating,” Kayama said finally, as if he had barely squeezed the words out. He stayed expressionless, but his words were emotional.

With that, Kayama walked away down the corridor, as if trying to get away from the hospital room.

I didn’t know what to do.

I wondered whether I should chase after Kayama, but then decided that I should leave him alone.

And then I entered Mamizu’s room.

Mamizu covered her face awkwardly and sighed. Silence passed by.

“It’s gotten hotter lately, hasn’t it,” I said vaguely as I approached her.

“Akira-kun said that he likes me,” Mamizu said, sounding astonished.

“I see,” I said.

Had Mamizu just replied, “I’m sorry,” like she had done with me?

“What did you say?” I asked.

“Sorry.”

As I expected, I thought.

But Mamizu continued. “I told him that there’s someone else I like.” She looked at me with a somewhat powerless, pathetic expression.

“O-oh. I see.”

It was kind of a shock. It was a sudden shock. It was the first time I’d heard this.

Who on earth was it?

When and where?

I was confused.

But I didn’t ask.

“Hey, I went to visit Shizusawa Sou’s grave the other day,” I said, changing the subject. I opened the photos I took the other day on my phone and showed Mamizu the screen.

“Wow, it really says ‘無.’” Mamizu returned to her usual self and stared at the screen of my phone with great interest. “Maybe I should have ‘無’ written on my grave, too.”

“I’d kind of want something else.”

“Like what?”

“Neurosis, maybe?”

“That’s terrible,” Mamizu said, giggling.

I laughed with her.

“What’s next?” I asked.

“What?”

“You know, the things you want to do.”

“Let’s see... Well then, I want to try smoking. You’d normally smoke at times like this, right?”

Times like what? I thought, feeling surprised.

“No, no, you can’t,” I said. “Mamizu, you’re ill. You definitely can’t smoke...”

“That’s why, that’s why it won’t be me doing it. The one smoking will be you, Takuya-kun. Have you forgotten the usual rule?” Mamizu gave a mischievous smile.

I was quite busy these days.

There was practice for the cultural festival’s play. We were gathering three times a week at the school or sometimes at the park, and practicing this and that. I was completely on break from my work at the maid café, too. The whole thing had pretty much become a gag once it was decided that the heroine would be a guy, so why did we need to practice so seriously? This question did occur to me, but I participated in the practice seriously. All of this was so that I could tell Mamizu about the sights that I could see while I was doing this.

That day, the classroom at school couldn't be used for various reasons, so we were practicing at the nearby park. Although it was September, it was still hot, and I performed in the park under the blazing sun, wishing I could be spared from this.

What we were practicing was a love story known by everyone. Romeo and Juliet love each other, but because of the conflict between their families and various other things, they can't get married. Juliet is about to be forced to marry another man, which she doesn't want, so she drinks a 'potion of false death.' She drinks this potion that makes her sleep as if she is dead, intending to fool everyone into thinking that she is dead and making them give up on the marriage. And then she would come back to life and secretly escape with Romeo. But news of the plan isn't delivered to Romeo, and he kills himself, believing that Juliet is actually dead. After that, when Juliet awakens, she feels despair at Romeo's death and commits suicide as well. The end. Ah, what a misunderstanding.

"Oh, Juliet, why have you died?" said Kayama, who was acting as Romeo, in an unmotivated voice.

It was indeed difficult to put emotion into lines like this.

After that incident, things between me and Kayama had become awkward, and we kind of weren't talking to each other.

"I'll die as well, Juliet, and follow you."

And the Romeo drinks the poison and dies.

"Romeo! Ah, why have you died!"

After that, Juliet, the character I'm playing, stabs herself with a dagger. And then the two of them die. A tragic, bad ending. That was the planned script.

"It lacks seriousness," said a girl from the theater club who was acting as the play's director, wearing a sour expression.

How can there be seriousness in something like this? I thought. "Give us some rest!" I shouted.

"We'll take a thirty-minute break!" the director announced.

We were practicing in a relaxed atmosphere. The people who had come to day were the six main cast members including me, the director, and two others – a total of nine people. The other students were probably studying hard for their university entrance exams or enjoying themselves somewhere.

Either way, it was certain that most of them would probably be under an air conditioner. Thinking about that made me somewhat bitter.

After that, I quietly slipped away from the park and headed for a nearby smoking area. I took out the cigarettes in my pocket and lit one.

"Careless, aren't you?" said Kayama's exasperated voice.

I turned around to see him behind me.

"What? Don't follow me," I said.

"Smoking while underage, that'd get you suspended."

"I don't really care if you report me."

I sucked in the cigarette smoke and then slowly exhaled. To be honest, I still wasn't used to it. I was just sucking it in and then letting it out without inhaling it into my lungs.

“Give it here,” Kayama said as he snatched the cigarette from my mouth, and then he deeply inhaled the smoke. “This is how you do it.”

There weren't many people in this outdoors smoking area. It was to be expected, as the sun was blazing hot. There was one slightly plump salaryman, smoking a cigarette as he wiped his sweat with a handkerchief.

“Kayama, you smoke?”

“In the past. I quit already, though... You know, Shizusawa Sou was a heavy smoker. It was in middle school, when I looked up to him.”

Ah, I see, so that's why Mamizu was interested in smoking as well. Indeed, the man in ‘One Ray of Light’ smoked like a chimney and enjoyed himself, despite not having long to live due to his luminescence disease.

“About Kayama Masataka,” Kayama said.

Masataka was Kayama's older brother. The reason I still remembered his name was, of course, because he'd died. Because he'd died and become significant.

“About my brother. He was quite smart. He was good at sports, too. I was kind of sick of him. That's why... I hated him. Honestly, I did, until he died.

“But my memories of him became more beautiful after he died. I sometimes almost think that he was actually a really good guy. Don't you get that?”

I got the feeling that this was the first time I'd heard Kayama talk about his brother directly.

"Right? What do you think my brother and your sister talked about when they were going out?" he asked.

"I can't even begin to imagine," I said. I had the feeling that I hadn't really heard Meiko talk about her boyfriend.

"I wonder if they talked about us."

"Who knows. What did you talk about with girls?"

"Ah, sometimes we talked about you and stuff."

That sounded a little creepy to me.

"I bet you were bad-mouthing me," I said.

"I suppose. I told them that there's a weird guy in my class." Kayama didn't deny it, and laughed it off. "Hey, the guy Mamizu likes, is it you?" he asked suddenly, sounding like he was complaining.

The plump salaryman turned around to look at us. What did he want? Was he thinking something like, *these guys are enjoying their youth, aren't they?*

"Probably not, right?" I said.

"You're pretty thick, aren't you?"

"Don't say things like you know everything."

“It pisses me off, though.” Kayama said in a violent tone that was unusual for him. “Say it clearly, Okada.”

Although he said that, I didn’t know what he wanted me to say clearly. “You only ever say profound things, don’t you? Are you not capable of talking normally?” I retorted seriously without thinking.

“So, Watarase Mamizu doesn’t love you?”

I was getting increasingly angry at Kayama for saying such misdirected things when he didn’t know anything.

I took the cigarette back from him, took one puff and put it out. I vacantly stared at the cloud of smoke that I’d exhaled as it rose into the sky. I suddenly remembered the ending to ‘One Ray of Light.’

The protagonist suffers from luminescence disease. He knows that he is going to die. One day, his friend that he met at the sanatorium, who also suffers from luminescence disease, dies. At night, when the man is cremated, the smoke rising from the chimney glows faintly. When the body of a patient with luminescence disease is cremated, the smoke emits light under the moonlight. And then that smoke becomes a ray of light as it climbs into the sky. As the protagonist watches his friend become that ray of light, and feels his own death approaching, he feels that the death of a person is a beautiful thing.

And that is where the story ends.

PART 4

During afternoon class, Yoshie-sensei was wearing a mourning dress. One of her teachers at university had passed away, and apparently there was going to be a wake funeral. She explained this at the beginning of the class.

When I got home, I sat in front of Meiko's butsudan and imagined what kind of funeral I'd have when I died.

I had a clear picture in mind. It would be ideal if nobody came to my funeral. Because I hated funerals.

And then I remembered Meiko's funeral. *That was terrible*, I thought.

It had been a sudden death, so everyone was confused. I was a close relative, so I attended, unable to skip out on it. Everyone was making their own speculations about my sister's death. I didn't want to hear them. Everyone was crying and just being noisy. I wanted them to shut up. I didn't cry. I heard relatives, uncles, looking at me and whispering, "I have no idea what he's thinking," and, "What a cold person." *Maybe that's true*, I thought.

There was a lot of alcohol and food at the wake funeral.

I didn't understand why people were drinking when Meiko had died, but everyone drank. I even saw people who looked like they were having fun. *Have they gone crazy?* I wondered. Out of my relatives' sight, I borrowed one of the beers. I shut myself in the toilet and drank it straight out of the bottle. It was my first time drinking alcohol. It was bitter and disgusting. Numerous people knocked on the door. I ignored all of them and continued drinking the beer in the toilet.

I'm sorry for being a cold person.

I silently apologized to Meiko in front of the butsudan.

Meiko was now just a photograph, so she was always smiling.

In the end, I tried to imagine Mamizu's funeral. But I couldn't even imagine what it would be like. When would Mamizu die? Would I go to her funeral? *I definitely won't go*, I thought.

“Isn’t there something strange about you lately, Okada-kun?” Riko-chan-san said during a break at work.

I did have the feeling that I’d been making a lot of mistakes while working. I’d over-boiled spaghetti and turned it into mush, and accidentally turned grilled chicken on rice into burnt chicken on rice. *Am I supposed to be a clumsy girl?*

“Sorry, I’ll be more careful,” I said.

“No, I’m not talking about your mistakes. Well, your mistakes as well. It’s just that you’re kind of making a face that looks like the world is about to end.”

Was I making such a depressed-looking expression? I hadn’t been aware of it at all.

“Did something happen?” Riko-chan-san asked.

Feeling that trying to fool her would be too troublesome, I gave her an honest reply. “I was rejected not long ago.”

“Eh, so you had someone you liked,” Riko-chan-san said, as if that was the more surprising thing. This was kind of unexpected.

“I suppose...”

The maid café’s business ran on a never-ending routine. The service was generally standard, and there wasn’t much that needed changing. There weren’t that many repeat customers, either. Even so, as if bored of doing the same things every day, the maids frequently adapted and ad-libbed things.

“Okada-kun, about the omelet rice dish, write ‘Happy birthday’ on it instead of a heart mark,” one of the maids said.

Although that was the instruction given to me, when I went to write the letters with ketchup, my hands stopped. *How can you expect me to write ‘tan!’* I thought. But if I wrote it in hiragana, there would be too many characters and it wouldn’t fit. In the end, I wrote ‘Happy birsday’ in English and got it over with.^[6]

Work ended as usual, and while I was walking home with Riko-chan-san, she suddenly pointed it out to me.

“Okada-kun, you made a spelling mistake. It’s ‘th,’ not ‘s.’ It’s middle school-level English. You’re going to quite a smart high school, right? Will you be alright like that?”

I’d always been bad at English, but it was true that I hadn’t been studying at all these days. Would I be alright? I felt a little anxious.

“Come to think of it, Okada-kun, you don’t really come in to work much these days, do you?” Riko-chan-san said.

“Ah, because summer vacation is over and I have various things to do, like preparing for the cultural festival. I might quit soon.”

I’d only been coming to work at the maid café about once a week lately.

“Eh, it’ll become kind of lonely around here, won’t it? You looked like the type who wouldn’t participate in things like a cultural festival, though,” Riko-chan-san said.

“I was that type of person...” My life had changed rather completely after I met Mamizu.

“So, what are you doing?”

“Romeo and Juliet. I’m playing Juliet.”

Riko-chan-san suppressed a laugh and looked at me as if to ask me whether I was sane. I was quite used to this kind of reaction.

“I’m normal,” I said.

“... That kind of intrigues me,” Riko-chan-san said.

“What does?”

“The way you say that.”

“It’s normal.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m talking about.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, never mind.”

The conversation paused there. We silently continued to walk along the footpath of the main road.

“About what you said the other time,” Riko-chan-san said, being the first to speak again.

“The other time?”

“You said, ‘next time.’”

“Ah...”

“Next time, do you want to go somewhere, the two of us?” Riko-chan-san said boldly.

I suddenly stopped walking. Riko-chan-san walked a few steps ahead of me.

“Don’t get so serious about it,” she added hastily.

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t feel like saying more than that.

Riko-chan-san’s expression was a little stiff. “I was joking. Let’s go home, Okada-kun.”

Unable to give anything else as a response, I just started moving my feet.

After parting with Riko-chan-san, I suddenly wanted to see Mamizu. I thought it was strange for me to be driven by such an impulse. I thought I was being spoiled. I wondered whether I should go home. But my feet headed naturally towards Mamizu's hospital room.

It was a quiet night, and the moon was beautiful. As I entered the hospital, it suddenly occurred to me. *Like an everyday event, like it's completely ordinary, people die in here. I just don't know about them.*

When I snuck into Mamizu's room, she was standing by the open window, looking outside. The curtains were swaying.

“Hurry up and go to sleep,” I said.

Mamizu turned around in surprise. “Wow, what is it all of a sudden?” Her voice hurt my feelings a little.

“Sorry. I was a bit free, so I came to play.” I didn't know what to say. I couldn't even explain it to myself, so that was all I could say.

“Are you an idiot? Think about the time,” Mamizu said.

Indeed, it was already eleven o'clock at night. Maybe this had been a little rash.

“Well, whatever. Hey, Takuya-kun, come here for a bit.” Mamizu's voice returned to its usual soft tone and she beckoned me towards the window.

“Here, look,” she said, pointing at the night air outside.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?” I asked.

As if in response to my question, Mamizu extended her arm outside the window.

The moon was beautiful tonight.

Under the moonlight, Mamizu's arm gradually began to glow.

No matter how many times I saw it, I would never get used to it. It seemed kind of mystical in my eyes. Though Mamizu might have disliked being seen that way.

“Hey, don’t you think the light has become stronger than before?” Mamizu said.

I strained my eyes and looked closely. Indeed, as she said, the light looked stronger than when we’d gone stargazing on the roof.

“The fact that the light has become stronger means... my condition has gotten that much worse,” Mamizu said in a tone that was as if she was talking about someone else.

“Yeah.” I didn’t know how to respond. I got the feeling that I couldn’t say anything.

“Say, Takuya-kun, you’ve lost someone important before, haven’t you?” Mamizu said suddenly, as if she’d wanted to say it before but only just remembered.

“That’s not true,” I lied.

“Really? It kind of seemed like you’re used to it.”

“Used to what?”

“People dying.”

I don't want to become someone like that, I thought.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I kind of regretted coming to Mamizu's room today. “I'm going home.”

As I turned my back to Mamizu and tried to head for the door, she grabbed the edge of my shirt.

“I'm sorry, Takuya-kun. Are you angry?” she asked.

“Not really,” I replied coldly.

“Hey.” Mamizu's voice was trembling a little. “If I told you that I was too scared to sleep, would you stay with me until morning?”

It was the first time that Mamizu had spoken such weak-hearted words.

I didn't reply. But the inside of my head was in chaos.

Just what kind of intentions did Mamizu have, saying something like that?

Mamizu closed the curtains and lay down on her bed. I sat down on the chair.

“Come here,” she said quietly.

In the end, I slipped into her bed.

“I'll tell you in advance that this isn't that kind of thing, so don't do anything strange, okay?”

“I won’t.”

I didn’t feel like I could get in the mood for that anyway. Having said that, I couldn’t calmly go to sleep, either.

“They said they’re going to take my cerebrospinal fluid for tests tomorrow,” Mamizu said, as if checking whether I was still awake. It seemed that she couldn’t sleep, either.

But I stayed silent and didn’t reply.

“There are two kinds of tests. The cause of my illness still hasn’t been identified. That’s why a way to cure it hasn’t been found. The main treatment is treatment of the symptoms as a temporary measure. And so, one type of test is for researching why people get this disease and finding out what causes it. In other words, I’m a guinea pig. They’re testing new drugs, and they’re doing experiments with my body every day.”

Despite my silence, Mamizu continued talking, not caring whether I was listening or not.

“Even if the cause is identified, the research will take years or decades, so I won’t be saved, though. But one day in the future, a cure might be found and other people might be saved, right? I’m a nice, good person, so I’m cooperating for humanity’s future.”

I was lying down with my eyes closed and my back facing Mamizu, so I didn’t know what kind of expression Mamizu was making as she said this.

“I’m great, aren’t I? So, you should praise me, Takuya-kun.”

I didn't know what I should say. I continued pretending that I was asleep. After a while, I could hear Mamizu's soft breathing as she slept. I quietly slipped out of the bed and went outside. I'd realized that it would be troublesome if I really stayed until morning and then someone found me there.

It was still three o'clock in the morning, so I killed some time at a late-night fast food restaurant and then took the first bus of the day home.

I was startled when I got home.

My mother was sitting at the table. She was sitting in the dim room with the lights off, not doing anything, just sitting there silently. I was surprised. Anyone would be surprised after seeing someone like that.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“You've been strange lately,” my mother said.

It seemed that she'd been waiting until morning for her son to come home.

“I'm begging you, please, just don't commit suicide.” My mother was gazing at me with vacant eyes. Her voice sounded like it was coiling around me.

“You're so irritating all the time. It's my choice whether I live or die, isn't it?” I would have normally let it go, but this time I said those words without thinking.

“You don't understand the feelings of a parent who has lost a child, Takuya.”

I didn't feel like arguing anymore. I was tired, and I wanted to hurry up and go to sleep. “You're an adult, so get a hold of yourself.”

Even after I said that, my mother continued scolding me repeatedly with similar words, but I ignored all of it and decided to go to my room. I went straight to sleep without taking a shower or changing into my pajamas.

On a day some time later, practice for the play ended and I went to Mamizu's hospital room to see her holding a red muffler. It seemed that this was the finished result of her knitting.

“You’re late, Takuya-kun,” Mamizu said.

“Sorry,” I said. I hadn’t promised that I’d be coming today, so there was no such thing as early or late, but I apologized anyway.

“Did you have practice for Romeo and Juliet today as well?”

“Juliet doesn’t have it easy.”

After that, I talked about the things that had happened during practice. I cut out the conversation I had with Kayama, though.

“How was the smoking?” Mamizu asked.

“It’s just bitter and it tastes bad. I can’t say I recommend it,” I said.

“Did you feel satisfied? Refreshed?”

“No... I didn’t really feel anything.”

“Oh. That’s boring,” Mamizu said, actually sounding very bored. “Hey, hey, Romeo is being played by Akira-kun, right?”

“Did you hear it from him the other day?”

“Yeah. Will you kiss? Kyah! How exciting.”

“Who’s going to kiss who!”

“How boring.”

I felt kind of irritated, so I pinched Mamizu’s cheeks.

“Stoop iiiit!”

Mamizu’s dismay was amusing as she tried to push me away, so I did it more persistently.

“I won’t stop.”

“Heeeeey!”

And then I said it, while imitating her new, strange way of speaking. “Whooo dooo yoooou liiike?”

Mamizu pushed my hands away and suddenly made a serious expression. “I am making an effort to not like anyone.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“So, it would be problematic if you were to interfere with that.”

Mamizu's words become more and more cryptic. Just what was I interfering with?

"Also, please give this muffler to my father. Without being found out by my mother," Mamizu said.

"Huh? Well, fine, I suppose..."

The place Makoto-san lived was far, though.

I'd put the contact details I got from Makoto-san earlier in my phone. I contacted him, and he said that he couldn't come to this city, but he would come to one of the nearby stations.

We met at a McDonald's. I arrived first and waited for him. When Makoto-san entered the store, he was frequently looking over his shoulder for some reason. He was just like a criminal in a TV drama, being careful of people tailing him.

"It seems that you've been taking care of my daughter." Makoto-san looked a little haggard. "This is a present for you, Okada-kun."

As I was wondering what it would be, Makoto-san handed me a book. The bookstore's packaging was still on it, so I didn't know what kind of book it was, but I didn't feel like checking it.

“... So, is it bad, Mamizu’s condition?” Makoto-san asked.

“It’s been almost a month since she was moved to a private room,” I said, telling him only the objective truth without including my subjective opinion.

“Since I’m divorced, legally, there are no problems. My bankruptcy problem won’t affect Mamizu and Ritsu. But... there are those who don’t mind using illegal means,” Makoto-san said.

“I was given this by Mamizu.” I put a paper bag on the table in front of Makoto-san.

The muffler that Mamizu had given me was inside it. But Makoto-san was engrossed in talking, and showed no interest in the bag’s contents.

“If it ever came out that this was a sham divorce, that I’ve been secretly sending money to Mamizu and Ritsu... it will cause trouble for them.”

Unable to bear it any longer, I took the muffler out of the paper bag and handed it to Makoto-san.

“This is...?”

“Mamizu knitted it. For you, Makoto-san.”

“I see.”

Makoto-san looked touched after seeing what was inside the paper bag.

“It’s a bit early, but she said that she might not survive until winter,” I said. I could see tears welling up in Makoto-san’s eyes. But I wasn’t composed, either. “Anyway, come and see her. Please,” I said, and then I left the store.

“Takuya-kun!” Makoto-san shouted at me from behind as I was walking down the street.

I didn’t want to turn around, but I had no choice, so I did.

“Do you love Mamizu?” Makoto-san’s expression looked somewhat pathetic and lacking in dignity.

“So what if I do love her?” I shouted angrily. And then I went across the pedestrian crossing without looking back again.

After that, I started to run.

Slipping between the people walking down the road, I ran as fast as I could.

It’s like I’m in an adolescent drama, I thought. *It’s like I’m an idiot. I am an idiot.*

Watarase Mamizu would die soon.

The reality of her death that I’d been trying not to look at, that I’d been averting my eyes from, was closing in on me.

After that, I reflected on the days that had gone by.

Most of Mamizu’s requests had been boring.

The fact that she had wanted to do such boring things before dying highlighted the reality of the situation even more in its own way.

But that’s not right, is it? I thought.

Are those things really what you wanted to do before you died?

Do you really have no regrets left?

Can Watarase Mamizu really die without regretting anything?

What is it that I'm able to do?

I began to hate how powerless I was.

I continued thinking in circles about these questions that seemed to have no answer.

I got home, but I kind of felt wide awake, so I couldn't sleep. Suddenly remembering the book that I got from Makoto-san, I took it out of my bag. I took off the packaging and looked at the title of the book.

How to make a snow globe

That was the title written on it. *Snow globes can be made?* This was surprising to me.

Actually, can't I fix this? I thought as I flipped through the pages.

Maybe Makoto-san had been trying to send me this kind of message when he gave me this book.

I stared at the wreckage of the snow globe that I still had in my possession. The miniature log house had lost the snowy world around it, and it was now

lying idly in my tiny room. Feeling guilty to leave it in that state, I'd tried several times to at least stand it up properly, but it hadn't gone very well. It was like a house that had been washed away by a tsunami. While it was inside the glass sphere, it had looked as if someone lived inside it, but now, it just looked like junk. It was a house that had lost something crucial.

A dysfunctional house.

For a moment, I saw a strange optical illusion. It felt like I was looking at my own house from the veranda of an apartment somewhere else through binoculars. Of course, my house wasn't a log house. But I felt like they were similar. It was a mysterious sensation. Next, I imagined Mamizu's house.

It seemed like I could get the materials I needed at a hardware store.

After second semester began, I'd begun visiting Mamizu's hospital room less frequently than during summer vacation. Two or three times a week. Mamizu's face grew paler each time I went.

Death was closing in on Watarase Mamizu.

I'd recently begun to feel it when I was next to her in the room.

Mamizu was rapidly losing weight.

“Mamizu. Isn't there something you want to do next?” I asked.

“... I want to sleep.”

At first, I thought Mamizu was joking. But she wasn’t. She lay down on her bed with a melancholic expression on her face. She didn’t even try to make eye contact with me.

“You don’t have to come anymore, Takuya-kun,” she said.

“Why would you say something like that?”

“Just forget about me completely.”

“What’s that supposed to mean...”

“Because it’s painful. I don’t want to see your face anymore.” Mamizu’s voice sounded a little hysterical. “Leave me alone. I hate you as a person. You’re irritating.”

“... Are you saying those kinds of things to try and make me hate you?” My voice was shaking, even though there was no use in me getting emotional. But I couldn’t stay calm.

“That’s right,” Mamizu said in a tired, desperate-sounding voice. “That’s my final request. ‘Never come to see me again.’ Do you understand?”

“... I understand.”

Why am I saying I understand? I don’t.

I left the room. It was possible that this was my last time seeing Mamizu. *Is this how it ends?* I thought as I realized this. *Just what was the time that we spent together meant to be?*

But there was no use in thinking about those things. I closed the door and put the hospital room behind me. *Everything is over*, I tried to tell myself.

All of it was just a bad dream.

I tried to forget about it right away.

In fact, after I met Mamizu, it's been nothing but troublesome.

She made me do all kinds of absurd things, and right at the start, she was clearly having fun by causing me trouble.

She's an unpleasant person.

Doesn't she have a twisted personality?

And she's quite self-centered as well.

And she's selfish.

And she tries to hide what she's thinking instead of saying it.

In other words, she's not honest.

And she's strong-willed.

Despite that, she's weak-hearted sometimes, too.

She cries easily.

Her emotions are intense.

She thinks about her family.

She's really kind.

She's delicate.

She's easily hurt.

I always ended up hurting her.

...

Will I ever be able to forget Mamizu?

That's impossible, I thought.

PART 5

Soon, the season would change from summer to autumn. Autumn, the season when Meiko died.

I often remembered Meiko during this season. And so, as autumn approached every year, I became more melancholic. This year in particular was the worst. I kind of disliked that I myself was going through the autumn of my first year of high school, the period of time my sister had last lived.

Two weeks had passed since I completely stopped seeing Mamizu, and the school festival was coming up the next day.

Even the students who hadn't normally been participating in practice for the play were participating now that the performance was a day away. There was the aspect of acting as a character, and wanting to take part in such a youth-like event was probably a part of human nature as well. Everyone was fairly busy, but relatively little work had been allocated to us members of the main cast, so we were actually quite free. I didn't really feel like offering to help, either.

“At last, it’s tomorrow, huh,” said Kayama.

I was leaning against the teacher’s lectern, and Kayama tossed me a can of fizzy drink that he seemed to have purchased from the vending machine on the first floor.

“Okada, why are you playing Juliet?” It was only now that Kayama asked this obvious question.

“Well... Actually, Mamizu wanted to play Juliet,” I said.

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Mamizu always tells me to do the ‘things she wants to do before she dies’ in her place, and then tell her about them.”

“So tomorrow, should I pretend that you’re Watarase Mamizu while I’m acting?”

“How tragic.”

The drink fizzed inside my mouth.

“Two more months, right?” Kayama said, in a tone that sounded like he expected me to already know.

I looked at his face in surprise. “Did Mamizu say that?”

I remembered that Mamizu had been told how long she had to live at the beginning of summer vacation. At the time, I had been too scared to ask her exactly how long it was.

“Yeah, when I went to her hospital room with her. You didn’t know, Okada?”

It was a shock to me. It was a shock that Kayama knew when I didn’t, but the figure of ‘two months’ was a blow to me as well. I felt like I’d been thrust into a pool of cold water.

“Hey, Okada. Why do beautiful people have to die while a piece of shit like me lives? That’s crazy, right? Don’t you think so?” Kayama said.

I wondered who he was talking about. Was it Mamizu, his older brother, or both? I wanted to ask, but I felt like I didn’t need to, so I stayed silent.

I tried to think of something else to say instead.

“I was rejected, too. By Watarase Mamizu.” I finally told Kayama that.

But Kayama didn’t look surprised at all. “Someone who’s always by my side, but whom I can never touch.”

“Huh?”

“That’s what Watarase Mamizu said about the guy she likes.”

It was my first time hearing this.

“She said that herself?” I asked.

“That’s right. So, she’s probably talking about you.”

“No, that’s not right. Mamizu and I cut ties the other day, and I don’t see her anymore.”

“Cut ties… are you a kid?”

“Indeed.”

Indeed, I am a kid, I thought.

‘Hey, one day, if I said don’t come anymore no matter what, would you still come and see me?’

Finally, I remembered Mamizu’s words all of a sudden.

The night wore on. At the end, we did a careful rehearsal of the play.

First, Juliet drinks the potion and enters a near-death state.

Next, Romeo kills himself, mistakenly thinking that Juliet is dead.

Finally, Juliet feels despair at Romeo’s death.

Nothingness. [無]

When the ones we love die, we must commit suicide.

The phrase that Meiko had drawn a red line under floated into my mind.

It takes bravery or some kind of strength to sneak into a hospital at night. I'd already done it multiple times, and perhaps I'd gained something like courage after I met Mamizu.

With that said, it's too good to be true for it to go well every time.

That was the case here.

With the real performance of the play coming the next day, I wanted to see Mamizu's face no matter what, so I snuck into the hospital late at night on the way back from school. And then I was caught by a nurse. It was the nurse named Okazaki, the one I'd talked to that time when Mamizu collapsed at the store.

“Sit down there.”

She sighed and gestured for me to sit on a chair at the nurse center.

“Your name? Tell the truth.”

“It's Okada.”

“Full name!” Okazaki-san said in a very harsh tone.

“Okada... Takuya.”

“As I thought.”

I didn’t know what was as she thought, but that was what she said.

“Once visiting hours are over, outsiders are prohibited from entering the rooms,” she continued.

“Yes... I’m sorry.” Now that things had come to this, I had no choice but to apologize. I hung my head and looked at the floor.

“Well, that doesn’t matter, does it?” Okazaki-san said, maintaining the serious expression on her face.

I lifted my head in surprise.

“More importantly, why did you suddenly stop visiting Watarase-san? You two are going out, aren’t you?”

I was shocked. It seemed that Okazaki-san was greatly misunderstanding something. I’d thought that she’d be too busy to keep track of who visited whom. It had never occurred to me that she’d know I’d been frequently visiting Mamizu’s hospital room.

“Did you have a fight? Or do you hate her now? Did it become painful to watch her grow weaker and weaker?”

“That’s not it. It’s just... She hates me,” I said. “She told me she doesn’t want to see my face.”

“So, that’s why you’re not showing it to her anymore. Hmm.” Okazaki-san reached her leg out towards me and kicked me lightly with the sandal on her foot. “Don’t be so half-baked about things.”

“... But I can’t help it, can I? She said she doesn’t want to see me. I have no choice but to draw back, do I? Or are you the type who feels moved by warped, stalker-ish love, Okazaki-san?” For some reason, I made a joke that was inappropriate given the situation. Even I knew that I was going nowhere with this.

“You don’t know anything. You don’t think badly of yourself for not knowing. You think you’re right. You’re just intoxicated on the sense of being right. It’s common, but nasty.” Okazaki-san said, throwing out profound sentences one after another as she stood up. “It’s time for me to make my rounds, so I’m going to go. You should go home, too. *Without* waking up sick patients in the middle of the night.”

I slowly stood up as well.

“While I’m on duty, I make my rounds around the patients’ beds at night. Lately, Watarase-san has been crying in her sleep. Ever since you stopped coming to visit, non-stop, you know. I don’t think she’s even aware of it. I can’t say anything about it, either. I can’t interfere with each individual patient’s feelings like that. She’s always saying, ‘Takuya-kun, I’m sorry.’ That’s your name, isn’t it? She’s apologizing to you every night. What made her like that? I don’t know the answer,” Okazaki-san said.

She said all of that very quickly. I wondered if she would have been better suited to being a comedian or politician.

“All I know is that the only person in the world it could be is you.” With that, Okazaki-san went to leave the nurse center.

“Wait!” I shouted, without thinking.

“Quiet. It’s night time.”

“I’m sorry. Umm, tomorrow, my class is performing a play. Tomorrow is the real performance. That’s why I wanted to see Mamizu’s face. I thought that I’d do my best for Mamizu’s sake. Could you tell her that for me?”

“If I feel like it,” Okazaki-san said, and then she left.

In the end, I obediently went home without seeing Mamizu.

Before the cultural festival performance, I was going through quite a painful experience.

“Don’t move, Takuya-kun.”

As I was playing Juliet, I’d been captured by the girls of the class and was being forced to put on make-up in the classroom. Wearing an oversized dress, too. I’d heard that I’d be wearing a dress, but I hadn’t heard that I’d be wearing make-up as well.

“You don’t really have to go this far, you know...” I said, feeling fed up.

But the class had already become carried away and weren't listening to me. I could hear the guys snickering. I could hear voices saying things like, "Okada-kun looks better with makeup, doesn't he?" "He might be prettier than me," and, "Actually, you look pretty good, Okada," which wasn't comforting at all. When I looked in the mirror, my appearance couldn't be described as anything but comical. I wanted to call it quits and run away.

"Okada, you're feeling nervous, aren't you?" said Kayama as he approached me, dressed like a nobleman. He looked at my makeup with a clearly curious expression.

"Not at all," I said.

I wanted to say, "Aren't you the one feeling nervous?" I could see a stiff expression on Kayama's face.

"I hope it goes well, Okada," Kayama said.

The moment I stepped out wearing a woman's clothing, there would be no avoiding Shakespeare's tragedy story degrading into a comedy.

"You should have dressed up as a woman as well. Romeo is a woman as well, a new, sensational yuri play," I said.

That would have been a tragicomedy instead, though.

"So, the actors are two guys, huh?"

"That's hilarious." Though I said that, it wasn't actually funny at all.

Still... Although I was already feeling sick of this, I intended to carry this out seriously.

Because this wasn't something that I was doing for myself.

I'd been quite serious during practice as well. So, it would be alright.

“It's alright, right?” I asked Kayama, suddenly feeling anxious.

“Yeah, you look good.” Kayama said, giving me his impression on my female clothing for some reason.

My make-up was finished, so I gave him a push and stood up.

At that moment, the phone in the pocket of my uniform that I'd tossed into the corner of the classroom began vibrating. I hastily went over to it and looked at the screen.

‘Watarase Mamizu’ was displayed on the screen.

And it was a video call.

“Oi, Okada, the real thing is about to begin,” someone said.

I ignored them and answered the call.

Mamizu's face filled the entire screen.

I saw her face and I... laughed.

“I heard that you wanted to see my face?” she said.

There were terrible bags under her bright-red eyes. Her face looked awful, as if she had no intention of concealing the fact that she'd been crying until moments earlier. I'd never seen Mamizu's face in a terrible state like this.

“What do you think?” Mamizu said proudly for some reason, with a self-satisfied expression.

“No matter what anyone says, you’re the most beautiful person in this world,” I said earnestly. I felt like a spell had been cast on this moment, and words like these would reach her now.

Mamizu laughed. “But your face is amazing as well, Takuya-kun. You’re like a princess.”

Shut up, I thought.

“I’m going, Mamizu.”

With the video call still going, I went out into the corridor. All of the students in the corridor turned to look at me in my full make-up and flashy dress. I couldn’t tell whether the noises they were making were screams or cheers.

It was a custom at our school for the cast to parade from the classroom that served as a waiting room to the auditorium where the play would be performed, wearing their costumes.

The students going back and forth stopped to cheer for us.

My classmates were following me in succession. Standing at the front, I walked boldly down the corridor, one step at a time. I walked while continuing the video call with Mamizu. I intended to bring Mamizu with me.

“You’re amazing, Takuya-kun,” Mamizu said, sounding impressed.

“The real thing starts now,” I said. Well, it wasn’t like I wasn’t nervous.

“Do your best!” Mamizu said.

“Yeah,” I replied briefly, and then I faced forward and continued walking.

I entered the auditorium.

I found Yoshie-sensei inside and approached her.

“What are you wearing? Wow, Takuya-kun, you look incredible,” she said as she saw me, half-laughing.

“No, I don’t need to hear that. This is connected with Mamizu right now. A video call,” I said.

“Huh? Why?”

“It doesn’t matter, so can you point my phone at the stage? Mamizu is a member of our class, too. I think she wants to see this.” I handed my phone to Yoshie-sensei.

Having been told that, she wouldn’t say no. She nodded silently and took my phone. I turned my back to her and headed from the spectator seats to the wing of the stage.

“Kayama, Mamizu is watching,” I said, calling out to Kayama who was waiting with a meek expression on his face.

“I know. You were on the phone with her just now, huh, Okada.”

“Well, yeah... let’s do this properly.”

“Yeah.”

And so our play, Romeo and Juliet, began.

As expected, the audience's main reaction to our play was laughter. Well, Juliet was being played by me, a guy, so they couldn't help but laugh. I thought it was fine that way.

But Kayama seemed strange.

Maybe because he was nervous, or maybe because of something else, he'd had no energy after the performance began, despite having enough spirit before the real thing. *Is Kayama surprisingly the type who is weaker when it matters?* I thought suspiciously. Already desperate by this point, I made my best effort to act as Juliet.

The play approached the final scene, and finally, all that was left was for Romeo and Juliet to die.

First, as Juliet, I drank the so-called 'potion of false death' and fell asleep in the middle of the stage as if I were dead.

Kayama, acting as Romeo who had discovered this, shouted the lines that he had practiced dozens of times.

"Oh, Juliet, why have you died?"

There was something abnormal about Kayama. He seemed to be struggling with the line after that. I had to continue sleeping as if I were dead, but I opened my eyes slightly to check on him.

There was an idiot, right in front of me.

Kayama was crying.

He was bawling.

Kayama, who hadn't cried even after falling from the second floor of a building, was crying.

He was crying so much that he couldn't say the next line.

The crowd was stirring in confusion after noticing this. "Hey, what's the matter?" "He's crying." "What is that, it doesn't look good." "What's wrong?" Kayama had sounded so unmotivated during practice, but he was completely absorbed in his lines now.

'So tomorrow, should I pretend that you're Watarase Mamizu while I'm acting?'

I remembered Kayama's words from yesterday.

Quite a long silence passed. It was like a broadcasting error.

Hey, hey, what are you going to do, Kayama? I watched Kayama nervously.

His tears hadn't stopped yet.

Even so, he managed to steady his breathing and say his lines all in one go. “I’ll die as well, Juliet, and follow you.” And then he went to drink the poison.

I reached my hand out reflexively. “Wait,” I said, standing up and grabbing Romeo’s arm.

Every single person there except for me was dumbfounded.

That was to be expected. Juliet, who was supposed to be asleep, had suddenly woken up and stopped Romeo’s suicide. With that, the two of them wouldn’t pass by one another. It wasn’t a painful story at all.

“Don’t die, Romeo!” I shouted, standing tall with my eyes wide open.
“Because I haven’t died yet!”

At that moment, the auditorium exploded with laughter.

“I was in a state of false death, Romeo. You don’t have to die. Because I’m alive!”

“W-w-w...” Kayama stared at me, looking completely astonished.

“This is ridiculous...” one of our classmates muttered at the wing of the stage, holding his head.

“Wow, lucky me!” Kayama said.

The audience laughed even more.

I thought that everyone in the class would hate me, but surprisingly, there weren't many who were angry about it. Everyone was sick of the ordinary Romeo and Juliet, and my horrible ad-lib had been well-received in the end, so nobody made any complaints. In fact, there were even some who praised me, saying, "That went well!" Either way, it was over already, so nobody was going on about it.

The only complaint came from our homeroom teacher, Yoshie-sensei.

"Okada-kun, that was a bit..."

Ignoring her scolding, I took my phone from her. The video call was still ongoing, and Mamizu was smiling on the other side of the screen.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

"Yeah. It was the most interesting out of all the Romeo and Juliet performances I've seen!"

"Thanks."

I headed outside the auditorium, still wearing the dress and holding my phone in my hand. I kind of felt like I was holding a miniature Mamizu in the palm of my hand.

It had already become completely dark outside the auditorium. It had become autumn before I knew it, and it was getting darker earlier these days.

"Oi, Juliet!" a voice shouted.

I turned around to see Kayama coming after me. He was still wearing his Romeo outfit and brandishing his cardboard sword. He threw me something

at me, and I caught it. It was a makeup removal sheet.

“Akira-kun, you were amazing too,” Mamizu said, noticing that Kayama was there.

“It was a great performance, wasn’t it?” Kayama said.

Don’t make me laugh, I thought.

“Okada, are you going to the celebration party after this?” Kayama said, sounding like he didn’t care.

“I’m not interested,” I said, wiping my face with the makeup remover.

More importantly, right now... I wanted to see Mamizu as soon as possible. That was how I honestly felt.

“I want to go!” Mamizu said.

“... So that means...”

“Go, Takuya-kun. Give me a proper report on it next time.”

“Look here...”

“You’re today’s hero, Takuya-kun. Ah, heroine, I mean. So, you should go.”

With that, Mamizu suddenly ended the call.

... Could it be that she was trying to be considerate?

If that was true, it wasn’t like her. I didn’t want her to do something like that. I wanted to see her.

“You know, Okada,” Kayama said.

“What?”

“Are you still afraid after all that?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“She likes you, doesn’t she?”

“Shut up.”

In the end, I decided to go to the celebration party that day. At the karaoke after-party, someone sang lyrics meaning something along the lines of, “Youth goes by in the blink of an eye.” *Everyone looks like they’re having fun*, I thought. Eventually, I decided to find an appropriate time to slip out and go home. When I looked at the time, it was a little past eleven o’clock. I wondered whether I should visit the hospital. But I’d just been scolded by the nurse Okazaki-san yesterday. I wanted Mamizu to rest properly, too. I decided to go to the hospital tomorrow instead.

When I got home, I remembered the snow globe. Now that I thought about it, I’d bought the materials and they were just lying around. I was kind of free, so I decided to try repairing the snow globe that I’d broken while reading the book that I’d received from Makoto-san.

First, I attached the glass bottle that I’d bought onto the miniature log house with adhesive as a lid. Next, I poured plenty of liquid glue inside the glass bottle. After that, I put in artificial snow called snow powder. This was what I’d thought to be confetti.

Finally, I closed the lid, flipped the whole thing over, and it was done. It was finished in just ten minutes. *It's so simple to do*, I thought, a little surprised.

However, it wasn't a round crystal ball design like the original; I'd simply reused a glass bottle, so it was quite a misshapen product.

PART 6

It was raining the next day, so I went to the hospital with an umbrella in hand. The umbrella stands were full of umbrellas. Was there a cold going around? I couldn't be bothered putting my umbrella in one of the locked stands, so I stuffed it into the nearest one and went inside. When Mamizu moved from a shared room to a private one, she had moved from the fourth floor to the sixth. But I couldn't even wait for the elevator. That was how unbearably impatient I felt. The snow globe was inside my bag. I climbed the stairs, one by one. I started sweating slightly. It was like some kind of light training.

I would say it properly.

Today, I would say it properly one more time.

I somehow finished climbing to the sixth floor and arrived in front of Mamizu's room.

There was some kind of note hanging on the door.

No visitors

That was what was written on it.

I shuddered. It was like those words had hit me in the back of the head. My spine froze. *No way*, I thought.

Unable to stand properly, I crouched down. My breathing grew wild. I felt like I was short of breath. The world was spinning. I felt like throwing up. I squatted there for a while.

What was going on inside? I wondered. But even if I went inside, I wouldn't be able to do anything. If it caused Mamizu's condition to worsen, it would defeat the purpose. But I wanted to know what kind situation Mamizu was in no matter what.

Wondering if Okazaki-san was around, I went to the nurse center. I'd only been here the day before, but the nurse center was a completely different sight now. It somehow seemed distant to me. Nothing had changed, but that was how I felt.

“Excuse me, I want to ask about Watarase Mamizu. What is her current situation?” I asked.

But Okazaki-san wasn't there. She was either off-duty or busy somewhere else.

“Who are you?” the nurse there asked.

I paused, disconcerted. What was I to Mamizu? I couldn't think of an appropriate word to define our relationship.

I'm...

“Just an acquaintance,” I said.

“Well then, Watarase-san is not accepting visitors. Please come and visit another day.”

Having been given this superficial answer, I turned around, feeling powerless.

But I couldn't just go home.

I sat on the bench in front of Mamizu's room and stared at the floor.

I wondered if Okazaki-san would come and call out to me if I sat there like that. But in the end, she didn't appear.

I was so anxious and helpless that I thought I was going to die.

Before I knew it, it was past eight o'clock in the evening.

“Visiting hours are over, so...” one of the other nurses said, telling me to go home.

I didn't even have the will to respond. I silently stepped onto the elevator with heavy footsteps.

On the way home, I sent about twenty messages to Mamizu from my phone.

> What's wrong?

> Are you alright?

- > Are you not alright?
- > You're alive, right?
- > You're fine, right?
- > Please tell me you're fine
- > Hey
- > Oi
- > Don't die
- > You can't die
- > You still have things you want me to do, right?
- > There are still a lot of things, right?
- > Dying is boring, you know
- > Because it's empty [無]
- > It's really dull
- > Let's play
- > I'm eating cup noodles at a convenience store now
- > I get hungry even when I'm sad
- > That fact is sad

> Let's sneak you out of the hospital next time and go somewhere

> We should have done that sooner

> Right?

> Let's enjoy life

> You're alive, right?

> Please be alive

> Please

> I'm begging you

> Please be alive

There was no display of the messages having been read. Mamizu was completely silent.

I couldn't get a wink of sleep, and it became morning. I felt like I could live on without ever sleeping again. I felt nauseous, so I vomited. It was the cup noodles I'd eaten the day before. I wanted to become sick in Mamizu's place. Either that, or die in her place. I couldn't prepare myself to live in a world without Mamizu.

I didn't feel like I could sleep even if I stayed at home, and I didn't feel like going to school either, so I went outside. My mind was hazy because I was sleep-deprived, but at the same time, it was clear. When it was put into words like that, they contradicted each other, but the haziness and clarity co-existed inside me.

There wasn't anyone around in the residential area in the morning. That made me feel lonely. I didn't even know when I'd become so weak to solitude. Despite having once thought that other people were just annoying. *People change*, I thought calmly.

I got on the train, went to the business district and shot zombies at the arcade. No matter how many I killed, the zombies kept attacking me. *They have so much HP*, I thought. In the end, I was eaten by the zombies, so I moved over to a racing game. Despite crashing spectacularly, I was alive. I was immortal. No matter what I did, I didn't die.

After that, I took purikura on my own. I looked at my own face and laughed as I saw my eyes growing wider and wider. I went outside and burned them all. I smoked three cigarettes at the same time. The smoke stung my eyes.

The thought kind of occurred to me as I was going across a pedestrian crossing, so I got in a taxi that was parked nearby.

“Please take me to the ocean,” I said.

I didn't know if I had enough money, but I didn't really care.

Anything would have been fun if Mamizu was with me, but doing things alone made me sad.

I arrived at the ocean. I just barely had enough money. But the problem was that I didn't know how I would get back. Well, things would probably work out. I could just hitchhike. Not that I'd ever done it before.

There were few people at the beach during the off season. I dived into the sand. I became covered in it. People occasionally walked past, looking at me

like I was crazy. I didn't care. I rolled around on the sand as if it were the carpet of my own home. My sense of time started to become paralyzed. Perhaps I slept for a moment, perhaps I didn't. Even if I did, it was only for a few seconds. It became evening, and then night.

Before I knew it, there was a police officer who'd come to have a look at me.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“I’m alright... I’m still normal,” I replied with no expression on my face.

And then my phone rang. I answered it immediately without even looking at the screen.

“Sorry. I was sleeping yesterday. What was with those messages? Were you worried?”

It was Mamizu’s voice. There was no strength in it.

“Yeah. Sorry. I was just feeling kind of worked up,” I said.

“Takuya-kun?! Are you crying?” Mamizu said, sounding surprised.

“Shut up. I’m not crying.” That was all I managed to say.

The next morning, when I went to Mamizu’s hospital room, she had a number of strange tubes in her arm. Even so, there was a surprisingly lively-

looking Mamizu there. When I entered the room, she got up and faced me right away.

“I’ve been a bit sleepy lately, so I sleep a lot,” she said.

Was Mamizu unaware that I’d come here yesterday?

Well, I didn’t care about that.

“I’m glad you’re alive.” That’s how I honestly felt. I almost felt like laughing.

If Mamizu was healthy, perhaps I would have had more thoughts regarding her.

Like wanting to be with her like this more.

Or wanting to be liked by her.

Or wanting to be treated kindly by her.

Or wanting her to not lie to me.

But all of that had been stripped off like layers of skin around a fruit, one by one, and the only thing left in the end was the feeling that it was fine as long as she was alive.

It was fine as long as she was alive.

“What’s wrong, Takuya-kun?”

I squeezed my eyes shut a little to endure this feeling.

“Don’t just stay quiet,” Mamizu said.

“I don’t have money,” I said.

“Huh? Are you asking me for money?”

“That’s not it. I went to the ocean by taxi and lost all my money, so I was in all kinds of trouble.”

“Why did you go to the ocean?”

“I thought I’d go to swim, but it looked too cold, so I gave up. After that, a policeman thought I was some kind of suspicious person, so I got questioned.”

“Are you an idiot?” Mamizu asked.

“Maybe I am. I borrowed money at the police box to get home,” I said.

“Making a return trip is troublesome, huh.”

“It’s quite far by train.”

“Takuya-kun, come here. Listen.” Mamizu beckoned me over.

“Alright.” I approached Mamizu’s bed.

I was a little nervous.

Mamizu’s arms reached out and pulled me strongly.

I fell against her chest.

I felt a soft sensation.

“What are you doing?” I asked. I was being held tightly. “Didn’t you say, ‘listen?’”

“Yeah. Listen to the sound of my heart.”

I listened carefully, and I could hear it clearly.

“It’s still beating strongly, isn’t it?” Mamizu said.

I quietly hugged her.

“Wah, hey, it’s hard to breathe!” Mamizu laughed, seeming embarrassed.
“Let me go, pervert, molester!”

I didn’t want to let go.

“Takuya-kun, my heart hurts,” Mamizu said, pushing me away. Her hands still had strength in them. “Hey, try imagining it. If the person you loved died, it would be painful. It would be tiring. You wouldn’t be able to forget them. You don’t want that, right? I tried imagining it. I think it would be impossible to live on. So let’s stop this, okay? Let’s stop it here.”

“Shut up,” I said, looking into her eyes. “I don’t care if it’s painful or tiring. I’ll never forget.”

“That bothers me,” Mamizu said, averting her eyes and covering her face.

“I love you.”

I’ll stop running away from my feelings, I thought. I can’t escape them.

I... We, can't escape them.

“That’s what bothers me,” she said, looking away and drawing herself away from me. She was cowering as if she were afraid of something, as if she were fearful of it.

“Why? I asked.

Mamizu was silent for a long time. I wasn’t looking at a clock, so I didn’t know how many seconds or minutes it was, but the two of us remained silent, as if the world were standing still. We didn’t move.

And then Mamizu looked at me.

She glared at me in silence.

I didn’t look away.

We stared at each other for a long time.

I mustn’t look away, I thought. I felt like something would be damaged if I looked away at that moment.

Mamizu looked at me as if she were angry.

Her eyes are so beautiful, I thought.

Tears flowed from those eyes.

Like a burst dam, once her tears started, they began streaming down endlessly, one after another.

Even so, I continued staring at her without making the slightest move.

And then she finally spoke a few brief words.

“Because I love you too, Takuya-kun.”

I wished that time would stop at that moment.

Sometimes, when I thought about the fact that Mamizu would die soon, I felt like I should just die as well.

All humans die someday. Early or late, they inevitably die.

So in that case, whether I died now or some other time, it wouldn't matter, right? I sometimes thought that.

It didn't seem that I could endure the cruel fact that this world would continue on even after Mamizu was gone. *I might not feel so angry if all of humanity was born at the same time and died at the same time*, I thought.

I thought that the world was cruel.

I didn't know the meaning behind living. This wasn't something that had just started; I'd thought this for a long time.

“You look terrible lately,” Kayama said to me one lunch break, looking at my face.

“Leave me alone,” I said.

“You’re not thinking anything strange, are you?”

“What do you mean, ‘anything strange?’”

Kayama fell silent.

“Does my face look like I’m going to run into the parliament building holding a bomb or something?” I asked.

“Yeah. It looks like you’d raid a girls’ school.”

“Do you want to do it together?”

“I’ll join you anytime.”

I laughed a little.

Kayama laughed with me.

“Thanks, Kayama,” I said.

“How are things with Watarase Mamizu?” Kayama asked.

“Nothing’s going to happen.” That was my honest opinion.

“Then do something about it. You’re a man, right?”

I wanted to say, “It’s not a matter of being a man or a woman, is it?” But it seemed that this would just lead to a pointless conversation, so I didn’t.

“What should I do?” I asked, not expecting an answer.

“You just need to be by her side and listen to her.” Kayama’s response was something really obvious. It was just like a mundane piece of advice given to normal couples.

“I guess so,” I said briefly.

Mamizu and I counted the days as we spent them together. Her condition fluctuated violently, repeatedly getting better and then worse. There were some times when she didn’t take visitors, like before. Even so, on the days when she was feeling better, we were able to have clear conversations like before. Mamizu didn’t ask me to do those ‘things she wanted to do before she died’ anymore.

“Don’t you have anything you want to do?” I said one day.

“Well then... I want to try kissing,” Mamizu said.

“Which means, as usual, I need to go out somewhere and kiss someone in your place, right, Mamizu?”

“That’s right. You just need to go ahead and kiss whoever you want to kiss, Takuya-kun! Hey, wait, ah!”

I tried to push Mamizu down and kiss her forcibly. She struggled and resisted.

“Wait! It’s too early!”

She was struggling so much that I stopped.

“I love you, Takuya-kun. I’m sorry for everything up until now,” Mamizu said, as if consoling me for being unable to kiss her. “Hey, maybe we should have become honest like this earlier? It’s a bit too late now, isn’t it.”

“Well… But it was necessary for us. If these kinds of things didn’t happen, our relationship might have been different. We might have become different. So it’s fine like this,” I said.

“Like that unattractive snow globe?” Mamizu smiled, pointing at the snow globe by her bed. It was the snow globe that I’d hand-made with a glass bottle. The same miniature log house was inside it.

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s misshapen, but… I suppose I can feel the love.”

I’d been finding it harder and harder to sleep these days.

So, I slept during class instead. I did nothing but sleep during the day, so my lifestyle became completely nocturnal.

I woke up during the night. I looked at the clock to see that it was 2AM. Less than an hour had passed since I fell asleep. I tried to sleep again, but it

seemed impossible.

I didn't have anything to do, so I started cleaning.

It didn't have to be cleaning; I didn't mind anything as long as I could immerse myself in it and be in a non-thinking state.

My room was full of things that I didn't need. *I suppose I'll throw it all out*, I thought.

A rope came out from deep inside a drawer of my desk.

That was something that I'd taken from my sister Meiko's room and hidden in my own room.

Meiko was often in low spirits after her boyfriend was killed in a traffic accident.

Even so, I think she tried to act relatively cheerful in front of me.

I was only in my first year of middle school back then, and maybe from Meiko's point of view, I was too young to be considered someone to open up and consult in regards to her problems.

That was how Meiko was, but I was worried about her.

One day, when I went inside her room, Meiko was doing something strange.

She was tying a piece of rope into a loop.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“You should learn to knock, Takuya,” my sister said angrily.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“What you saw today is a secret from everyone, even Mom. Make sure you keep it a secret, alright?”

“Why?”

“A person’s dignity depends on it.”

Back then, I didn’t really understand the meaning of Meiko’s words.

But Meiko’s expression was so serious that I had no choice but with reply,
“Alright.”

I didn’t know the meaning of her words, but it wasn’t as if I didn’t know the meaning behind the rope.

The next day, a car collided with Meiko while she was crossing a road, and she died.

It was said that she tried to run across a main road with no traffic lights or anything, where cars went back and forth at great speed.

Nobody knew why she’d done such a reckless thing.

But before Meiko’s wake funeral, I’d remembered that rope. I’d gone inside Meiko’s room, taken the rope and hidden it in my own room. I’d never told

anyone about it. I'd had the feeling that it was something that I shouldn't tell anyone about. Of course, mentioning it during the counseling had been out of the question.

Now, I felt like I could understand the meaning of the 'dignity' that Meiko had mentioned.

Feeling like it, I tried passing my head through the loop that Meiko had made with the rope.

I closed my eyes a little and lay down.

I had the feeling that I might be able to meet Meiko in my dreams if I did that.

I decided to quit my part-time job at the maid café. Since I was completely unable to concentrate, I was causing trouble for everyone. With that said, the biggest reason was because I wanted to treasure the time I spent with Mamizu.

But when I told the owner that I was quitting, I suddenly felt very sad. Treasuring the remaining days. I felt like quitting my part-time job for that reason meant that I'd already accepted Mamizu's death. I felt kind of weary-minded when that thought occurred to me.

After my last shift, I was with Riko-chan-san on the way home as always.

“Are you alright?” Riko-chan-san asked me for about the thirtieth time since we’d started walking. It had actually become a little irritating.

But knowing that I was probably making a face that made it seem that I wasn’t alright at all, I didn’t feel like talking back. In fact, my feelings of guilt came before my irritation.

“I’m alright,” I said.

The lights changed from green to red. I didn’t notice. Without even realizing it, I’d developed a habit of walking with my head facing downwards.

Riko-chan-san crossed the pedestrian crossing first, turned around, and called out to me. “Okada-kun, it’s dangerous if you don’t hurry and cross.”

I looked around and saw that the traffic was sparse. There was only one car approaching.

“I’m alright,” I said.

My body somehow lost its strength, and I stared at the car in a daze.

I noticed that it was the same model of car that had hit my sister Meiko.

At that moment, I felt a sensation like something softly slipping into my consciousness.

I felt like if I stood there a little longer, I would understand how Meiko felt.

I couldn't take a single step.

It felt like I was in sleep paralysis.

Riko-chan-san shouted something, bringing me back to my senses. When I came to, she was there in front of me. She had thrown herself between me and the car.

“STOP!”

The car suddenly put on its brakes and just barely stopped in time to avoid hitting Riko-chan-san. Riko-chan-san pulled me forcibly onto the footpath, half-dragging me.

She glared at me with a dreadful look in her eyes. I thought she was going to say something to me. I thought it would be fine for her to say anything to me. But she said nothing. She raised her hand. I thought she was going to slap me, but she didn't. She placed her hand on my cheek instead.

Riko-chan-san was crying.

Why are you crying? I thought.

“Okada-kun, your heart is broken,” Riko-chan-san said, and with that, she turned her back to me and walked away.

I stood in a daze on the evening footpath for a long time.

PART 7

Mamizu had gradually started to talk less and less. I got the feeling that even speaking was tiring for her.

She started lashing out at me from time to time. She started arguments with me over trivial things. When that happened, she said things like “You actually should stop coming,” and “Goodbye.” These had already become standard phrases for her to say. I never really responded to them.

Unlike in the past, Mamizu cried often these days. It was possible that she had done her best to not cry in front of me up until now. It was possible that her lashing out at me was because she was hesitant to show weakness. With that being the case, strangely enough, I didn’t have any negative feelings about it.

“Dying of illness would be annoying, so maybe I’ll have you kill me, Takuya-kun,” Mamizu said.

She was lively that day. And she was in a good mood, too. She was talking a lot, which was unusual these days.

“I don’t really want to go to prison yet, though,” I said.

“Then shall we commit a double suicide? Takuya-kun, will you die with me?” Mamizu said, making a joke that couldn’t be laughed at.

“Sure,” I said. “So, how do you want us to commit the double suicide?”

“Suicide by drowning is a bit common, isn’t it?”

“Do you really need to think so hard about this?”

“How about hanging?”

I tried imagining it. Our two corpses, dangling somewhere together. It seemed stupid to me.

“Then how about jumping off a building?” Mamizu suggested.

The two of us flying through the air together. That seemed stupid as well. It was more like some kind of special fighting move than something romantic. Like Double whatever Buster, or something.

“Seppuku?” I tried suggesting.

“Isn’t that a bit too all-out?” Mamizu said. “And that would need someone to behead us to finish us off. One of us wouldn’t be able to die. It’ll be really painful if you fail to die, you know. I think a more casual double suicide would be better.”

“How about freezing to death?”

“But where would we freeze?”

“A snowy mountain or something?”

“That’s too far!”

“What about inside a freezer?”

“Will there be any that would fit two people inside?”

“An industrial-sized one.”

“We should find an industrial-sized one then, shouldn’t we?”

Although we were exchanging jokes like this, I didn’t really feel any better.

I actually wanted her to say more easy-to-understand, selfish things and laugh.

I wanted her to make me do something ridiculous that seemed like it would be a punishment game, then laugh at me as she watched me endure it, just like she did in the beginning.

“Don’t you have any more ‘things you want to do before you die’ left?” I asked.

“Well then, here’s the final one,” Mamizu said, looking at me directly.

The word “final” startled me.

“I want to know what happens after death,” Mamizu said.

Hearing those words, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

The day that Kayama saved me was in my mind.

Ever since that day, the day that I didn’t die, it had always been there.

I'd always felt like I was dead, even while I was living.

So, I thought of a good way.

“Mamizu. I’ll visit you one more time tonight,” I said, and then I left the hospital room.

Mamizu had a curious expression on her face. It was an expression that said, “I don’t understand.”

You’ll understand soon, I thought.

I returned home, calmed myself and thought about my idea. But it wasn’t an idea that I’d come up with on impulse. That was why I didn’t waver. I thought that this was the best idea.

I pressed my hands together in front of Meiko’s butsudan.

Meiko-neechan.

After you died, I wondered why you’d died, over and over. I thought about it about a hundred times. But I didn’t understand your feelings at all. I thought you were an idiot. I couldn’t understand the feeling of dying at all. I even gave up on trying to understand, thinking that it couldn’t be helped because we were two separate people, even if we were brother and sister. But still, it stayed on my mind.

If you died because your boyfriend died, then there was no way I could understand your feelings back then. I'd never liked anyone or had any serious troubles over the death of someone important.

But I finally understand.

I understand the meaning behind that despair.

– When the ones we love die, we must commit suicide.

The other day, I tried being hit by a car as well, and nearly got hit.

At that moment, I felt like I finally understood.

I thought I finally understood your feelings.

“Hey, how long are you going to be praying to Meiko for?”

I was pulled back into reality by my mother’s voice. I saw her busily putting food on the dining table.

“I’ll help,” I said, going to stand up next to my mother.

“That’s kind of odd,” she said.

Dinner was curry and rice. It was the dish that Meiko had liked. Even after Meiko died, my mother had continued making it every week without fail.

“The curry and rice we have is strange, isn’t it?” I said.

My mother made a completely surprised expression.

“I mean, it’s seafood every time,” I continued. “It’s normally meat, isn’t it? Is it to match Meiko-nieechan’s tastes?”

My mother laughed. “Actually, it’s me who likes it,” she said. She’d never told me that before. “Your father dislikes curry, right? So, it was hard for me to put it on the dinner table until Meiko was born. But Meiko took after me. She liked seafood curry. That’s how I started being able to put it on the table with confidence.”

“So, in other words, you’ve always been making it just because you want to eat it yourself?”

“Exactly,” my mother said with a mischievous smile.

“Seconds, please,” I said, though I was honestly full.

“Go and get it yourself,” my mother said as she brought me a second serving.

“You know, Mom,” I said as I ate. “I’m alright now.”

For a moment, my mother made an expression that showed that she didn’t know what I was talking about. And then it turned into an expression of understanding.

It was hard to say everything that was on my mind, so that was the only way I could say it.

“Really?” my mother said, looking somewhat happy.

I felt a stab of pain in my chest as I looked at her.

“Yeah. I’m alright.”

After that, I took a shower, brushed my teeth and changed into a white shirt.

I went out onto the veranda and called Kayama.

“What do you want?” said Kayama’s voice on the other end.

“I’m transferring schools,” I said. In the end, I couldn’t tell him everything.

“Huh? That’s sudden.”

“My dad moved jobs.”

“Where?” Kayama asked.

“Where do you think?”

“Overseas?”

“Exactly,” I said, as if to say that I was impressed he knew.

“Things will get lonely around here.”

“Kayama, thanks for everything up until now.”

A little silence passed after I said that.

“You’re lying, aren’t you?” Kayama said plainly. “Okada, where are you now?”

I ended the call and turned my phone off.

After that, I gave Kamenosuke a large amount of food. Kamenosuke was wandering around his tank, looking at me with the same carefree, sleepy-

looking expression. *If I'm reborn, I want to be a turtle*, I thought, despite thinking that there was probably no such thing as reincarnation.

I left the house after ten o'clock.

“Where are you going at this time of night?” my mother asked in a worried tone, stopping me. Perhaps she had noticed something.

“Just over there, not far,” I said.

And then I left the house.

In the middle of the night, I snuck into Mamizu’s room. When I went inside, Mamizu was waiting for me with bated breath.

“You’re late, Takuya-kun,” she said.

I took the wheelchair in the corner of the room and moved it next to the bed. Mamizu’s body had weakened so much that she was barely able to walk.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“To the roof,” I replied.

“Hey, the elevator only goes up to the seventh floor, so we can’t go all the way to the roof,” Mamizu said, meaning that we couldn’t use the wheelchair because of that. “Will you carry me?”

She sounded a little excited. So, I felt excited too.

I'd never carried a girl on my back before, so I wasn't confident, but this wasn't the time to be flustered or make mistakes. I calmly leaned over near the bed and gestured for her to get on.

Mamizu made a small noise as she jumped onto my back as if embracing me. At first, I thought for a moment that she was messing around, but I quickly realized that she no longer had the strength to slowly lower herself onto my back and rest her weight gently against me.

I opened the door and went out into the corridor.

There were no signs of the enemy, the nurses who would thwart us. It was fine.

I turned at the end of the corridor and approached the stairs. I climbed carefully, one stair at a time.

Mamizu was clinging onto me, not saying a word.

I thought that this was the ultimate happiness.

I wasn't sad at all.

I even felt like I had been born into this world for the purpose of living this very moment.

Cherishing this very brief period of time, I climbed up the stairs towards the roof.

And then we arrived.

It was the rooftop of the hospital that we hadn't visited since we went stargazing.

“It's pitch-black, isn't it?” Mamizu whispered near my ear, sounding like she were humming.

There was a clear, cloudless night sky outside. The moon and stars were gleaming in the dark. Perhaps because it was autumn, the moon looked more beautiful than before.

I walked on, one firm footstep at a time, across the concrete floor of the rooftop.

“Ah.” Mamizu made a noise of surprise.

At the same time, I felt the light on my back.

“I'm really shining, aren't I?”

I looked over my shoulder and saw that her body was shining quite brilliantly.

With the glowing phenomenon in the human body that is specific to luminescence disease, the body glows when bathed in the moonlight, and as the disease progresses, the light becomes stronger. Mamizu's body was

emitting a light so intense that it was incomparable to the time when we were stargazing.

“I’m pretty, like a firefly, right?” Mamizu said, seeming embarrassed.

“You’re the most beautiful person in the universe,” I said.

I sat Mamizu down on the bench.

“The wind feels good, doesn’t it?” she said. Her long hair was swaying, unable to resist the wind. “I’m really glad that I met you, Takuya-kun.”

In this darkness, Mamizu’s expression was the only thing I could see clearly. I could see her even more clearly than the distant moon and stars.

“I don’t have any regrets left,” she said, a content expression on her face.

This is the face of someone who has completely accepted death, I thought.

“But I don’t, either. None at all,” I said. I really felt that.

“You’re different from me, Takuya-kun.”

“I’m not.”

My life had already become nothing [無].

“Be different,” Mamizu pleaded, wearing a sad expression.

I closed her eyes with my fingers.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just do as I say. Keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them. Okay?”

“... Yeah.”

And now, this was where the real thing began.

I quickly walked towards the corner of the rooftop. With a single jump, I cleared the railing that was there to prevent people from falling. The darkness stretched out in front of me. I was nine floors up. So, it would be certain. The second floor of a building was nothing in comparison to this.

If I took a few more steps, I would be able to perform a brilliant jump. I would be able to perform a real jump that Kayama’s jump back then wouldn’t be able to compare to. I walked right up to the very edge.

Once I was half a step from falling, I turned and looked back. “You can open your eyes now, Mamizu!”

Mamizu opened her eyes. And then she looked at me with clear bewilderment. “What are you... doing?” She stared at me, dumbfounded.

“I’m going to die now.”

Am I crazy? That’s not it, I thought. What’s crazy is this world, a world where Mamizu is dying.

“I’m going to let you know what happens after death,” I said.

“... Are you stupid?”

“I’ll teach you that dying isn’t scary.”

“There’s no way that it isn’t scary,” Mamizu said, her voice trembling.

“There’s no way it’s not scary! Of course it’s scary! Even for me; I’m still hopelessly scared of it!”

“I’m far more scared of living,” I said. “I’m scared of a me that will continue living on and forget. I’m scared of a me that will start to remember English words, the names of classmates I don’t care about, how to get to new places and how to hand people my business card instead of your voice, the way you laugh, the intense way you express your emotions and the way you breathe in and out. If I keep on living even after you die, a moment might come when I think that life isn’t all that bad. I’m scared of that.”

“So, because of that, you’re going to die?”

“I’ve always felt guilty for living.”

Always, ever since Meiko died.

“Don’t you think the world is cruel? I think it is. Every day, people die one after another, and new people are born. Everyone forgets the people who have died and turns their eyes towards the bright future. Precious people die, but the world continues on. Is there anything crueler than that? I can’t endure a world like that,” I said. “I don’t want to.”

“That’s crazy, Takuya-kun.”

“I want you to see me die, and see what happens after I die. You’re interested in death, right? I am, too. Maybe that’s why I’ve always been drawn to you. I want to die before you do.”

With that, I turned my back to Mamizu.

My eyes had started to gradually get used to the darkness of the night.

I looked down and saw the distant concrete, far below. *Nine floors up is pretty high*, I thought. Instant death was certain.

Kayama.

I'm going to do a far more incredible jump than you.

I thought that with this, I would finally understand Meiko's true feelings. I thought that I could become closer to her.

My legs trembled.

I heard a metallic noise behind me.

It was the noise of the railing being shaken.

I turned around in surprise.

I couldn't believe it.

Mamizu was right on the other side of the railing.

Even though she was supposed to be almost unable to walk.

She had used her own strength to crawl all the way there.

“I don't care,” she said. “I don't care about what happens after death.”

I was quite bewildered.

You don't care?

There's no way you don't care, is there?

You're about to die, Mamizu. It's only only natural for that to be the thing you're most curious about. It's the same for everyone. Even for a healthy person like me. We don't know what happens after death, and we're afraid of it.

“I've only just realized that I don't care. I always thought that I wanted to know. But I was wrong. Thanks to you, I've finally realized that,” Mamizu said.

I thought she was lying. Mamizu was lying. She just wanted to stop me.

“I've always known that you admire me because I'm going to die soon.”

Mamizu grasped the railing with both hands and raised herself up unsteadily. She stood on her feet, resting her body's weight against the railing. My chest tightened as I watched her.

“I've always been worried about you. But I couldn't reach out to you. Because I thought I couldn't understand people's despair. Your despair is different from mine. I thought that if my despair is the despair of a dying person, your despair is the despair of someone who has to live on. I thought we were really, really far apart.

“I was always desperately trying to accept my death. I told myself that death is a divine gift given to humans. There's no such thing as a human who doesn't die. I wanted to erase my attachments to living, one by one. That's why I made a list of ‘things I want to do before I die.’

“But it was really painful. I thought that it would have been better to never be born than to feel this pain. Countless times, I thought that if I was going to die like this, I shouldn’t have been born at all. I thought that if there’s a god, he must be a cold-blooded psychopath or something. He let me be born and have a taste of all kinds of things, only to take it all away from me again and kill me in the end. I thought that all of life was something to be regretted. I was frustrated at how happy and fun things had become horrible and bitter. I suffered because of that.

“It would have been better if my life was empty [無] from the start. It would have been better for it to be empty from start to finish. If I didn’t know about living, I wouldn’t have felt the pain of dying. I always wanted to become nothing [無]. I always wanted to become closer to nothing. I wanted to make it as if my life had never happened. I wanted to lose the interest I have in this world.

“But there was a person who changed the way I was. It was you. Even if I gave up on everything else, you were the only thing that I couldn’t give up on. Even though I always tried. Maybe I’ve gone crazy, thinking that you’re more important to me than I am to myself.

“Just now, I imagined the future in a world where you died. I thought, ‘That can’t happen.’ At that moment, I realized that I still have expectations for this world. I thought that a world where you are alive and a world where you are dead would be completely different from each other.

“And then I became aware of a desire that I’ve always kept sealed inside me. I wanted to live. I want to live. I want to live more. I want to live much longer. I want to live a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand years. I want to live forever. I don’t care what happens after death! I just want to live. I want to

live, Takuya-kun. Because of you, I want to live so badly that I can't help myself. So please take responsibility for making someone who is about to die feel this way."

Mamizu's voice felt like it was right next to me. Her voice carried well on this rooftop at night. It was as if her voice were transparent.

"I, Watarase Mamizu, will now declare my final request to Okada Takuya-kun. Please listen," she said, an enraptured expression on her face. "I want to know what will happen if you keep living from now. I'm so immensely curious about how the world will continue after I die that I feel like my heart will burst. It's because of you that I feel this way."

"Before I met you, I thought the world would end when I died. If I died and became nothing [無], I wouldn't be able to know whether the world existed or not. So I thought that would be the end of the world."

"But it was you who made me realize that I was wrong. I'm helplessly curious about this wonderful world where you exist, Takuya-kun. So..."

Mamizu inhaled deeply, and then continued.

"Please live on in my stead. Please search the corners of this world and see and listen to and experience all kinds of things. And please continue to teach the meaning of life to the me who lives on inside you."

Without thinking, as if I were being drawn in, I approached the railing from the edge of the rooftop. I approached life, walking away from death.

This was my defeat.

I had been defeated by Watarase Mamizu.

“Will you fulfil my last request?” she whispered.

Her lips were right there.

Without any hesitation, I kissed her.

Mamizu quickly pulled her lips away and looked at me.

And then she kissed me back.

I love you.

I love you.

I said that to her, over and over.

Watarase Mamizu lived for fourteen more days after that.

CHAPTER 4:

ENDLESS SEASON

I'd thought that I would never go to an amusement park alone for a second time, but here I was.

The eyes of the people looking at me didn't bother me.

I headed straight for the queue outside a thrill ride.

It was a weekday, and the amusement park wasn't crowded.

I told the employees that I would pay the price for two people and asked them to leave the seat next to mine empty. They argued with me a little, but I explained my circumstances to them politely and honestly, and they allowed it.

The rollercoaster slowly reached the top. I felt the same unpleasant situation that I hadn't become accustomed to. It didn't seem like I would ever come to like rollercoasters in my life.

In the next moment, the rollercoaster began plummeting downwards.

I let out a wordless scream.

“Dear Okada Takuya-sama.

“I wonder how you will feel when you listen to this voice recording. I can’t even begin to imagine. I actually wanted to write a letter or make a video recording, but I don’t have the strength, so it was impossible. I made a voice recording because it seemed like I could still manage to record my voice while lying down.

“I actually wanted to go somewhere with you, just the two of us. But I thought that it would hurt you if I said that out loud. No, I would have been hurt more than anyone, so I was too scared to say it.

“Takuya-kun, I wanted to go to an amusement park with you.”

Back then, I was working hard on a small item.

On that night at the hospital, I’d received the notebook that had all of the things that Mamizu had wanted to do before she died written in it. She’d told me that she was giving it to me because it would be embarrassing if her parents saw it one day. When I went home and looked at it carefully, I’d seen that there were still some things written in it that I hadn’t done. There was one that had particularly caught my eye.

I want to make a new snow globe.

One like this

↓↓↓

The notebook contained a doodle depicting a certain scene of life. It was difficult to call it artistic, but I was well aware of what that picture was.

I bought clay and tried to reproduce Mamizu's picture with it, but I'd always been clumsy to begin with, so it didn't go well at all. I continued using trial and error, driven by my desire to make it happen.

That's when it happened.

Late at night, I received a call from Makoto-san's cellphone.

Several days ago, Makoto-san had stopped fearing the debt collectors and started spending a lot of time in Mamizu's hospital room. It was partially because Mamizu's death was near. And the large reason that he'd feared the debt collectors turning to Mamizu's mother was because of Mamizu's treatment fees. And so, Makoto-san had started frequently visiting Mamizu's hospital room, and while I felt relieved, I also had somewhat conflicting emotions. Because this was also indicative of how close Mamizu's death was.

"Mamizu says that she wants to see you one last time," Makoto-san said.

I hurriedly got into a taxi and went to the hospital.

But I was too late.

By the time I arrived at the hospital, Mamizu had died.

So, they really do put white cloths over people when they die, I thought like an idiot.

“She was conscious until just a moment ago,” Makoto-san said in a pained voice.

“I talked with her plenty while she was alive,” I just barely managed to say.

I asked Makoto-san and Ritsu-san to show me Mamizu’s face.

She was smiling.

I thought it was unbelievable. Perhaps my eyes were looking at an optical illusion.

But I could have described her as looking peaceful.

“Mamizu told me to give this to you, Takuya-kun.” Makoto-san handed me a voice recorder with a somewhat complicated expression. “From about ten days ago, maybe? It looked like she was recording, little by little. She said she wanted you to listen to it.”

I hadn’t known about this. I didn’t think that she’d ever used this voice recorder in front of me.

I said goodbye to Makoto-san and Ritsu-san, and then left the hospital room.

It was past three o’clock in the morning. Even on the road in front of the hospital, there were almost no cars going by.

My house was a little far from here; it normally took me an hour and a half or so to get there from the hospital. But I wanted to walk home, so I did that. It would probably become morning and the sun would start shining on the road as I walked.

There were almost no cars on the main road. The idea suddenly occurred to me, so I ran out, right into the center of the road.

On the four-lane highway that would normally have an enormous number of cars going back and forth, there was only me.

Just like that, I continued walking down the center of the main road with wide footsteps.

I held the voice recorder, plugged in the earphones that Mamizu had once given to me as a present, and tried listening to her voice.

Strangely, no tears came out. In a vacant state of mind, I thought that it might be too early for me to cry.

“Now then, I actually have several ‘things that I want to do before I die’ left. Leaving this voice recording was one of them. Do you find this bothersome? Even if you do, please listen carefully. I think I shall announce them now. Tadaaah! This is the first request. When I die, please cremate my body at night.”

After listening this far, I hastily called Makoto-san and explained the situation. *Why would you tell that to me instead of your family?* I thought. Maybe Mamizu had wanted me to panic like this, or maybe she'd been a little embarrassed to explain Shizusawa Sou's 'One Ray of Light' to her family.

A lot of people came to Mamizu's funeral. I was in a somewhat clear mood. Classmates I normally never even saw were there, crying loudly.

I didn't cry yet.

"Okada, were you close to Watarase-san?" one of my classmates asked me curiously, having seen me talking intimately with Makoto-san and Ritsu-san.

"She was my girlfriend."

"What?!" My classmates exclaimed in surprise.

"You're being too loud," I said.

"Please make sure to attend my funeral. I kind of have the feeling that you'd skip that kind of thing, Takuya-kun.

"And please tell everyone that I was your girlfriend. I wonder if I'm your girlfriend? We never really confirmed it with words, so I don't have much confidence to say that I am.

“If you didn’t think that way, then please make me your girlfriend now. Because I want you to show off to everyone that even this poor girl who died a premature death had such a wonderful boyfriend. And I want you to show off that you had a pretty girlfriend like me, Takuya-kun.”

Of course, the crematorium wasn’t normally open at night. But apparently, they received this kind of request from time to time. Luminescence disease patients sometimes wrote in their wills that they wanted their remains to be cremated at night. And so, they’d made an exception.

Normally, only close relatives were supposed to attend the cremation, but I invited Kayama and the two of us went. Of course, Makoto-san allowed Kayama to come.

We left at some point during the preparations, and instead of staying to collect Mamizu’s ashes, we climbed a hill that would have a clear view of the pillar of smoke from the cremation.

It was generally quiet nearby. But from time to time, we heard cars going by on a really distant road somewhere.

And then Mamizu’s cremation began.

There was a full moon in the sky.

Mamizu's body burned, becoming a pillar of smoke that danced its way up into the air. There was a faint light surrounding that pale white smoke.

Illuminated by the moon, the smoke became a ray of light that climbed into the heavens.

With the cloudless night sky in the background, the smoke from Mamizu's body shone with a pale light.

The days that I'd spent with Mamizu until now momentarily flashed into my mind and disappeared again at an incredible speed.

That was Mamizu's dead body.

It was impossible to believe that this scene was happening in reality.

Perhaps this was an imprudent impression, but... that light was far more beautiful than any shining aurora or sparkling rainbow. It was so beautiful that it sent shivers down my spine.

Watching that light dissolve into the night sky, I made a decision.

I decided that I would never forget this scene for the rest of my life.

I want to show Mamizu this sight, I thought nonsensically a few moments later.

“It’s more beautiful than I thought it would be,” Kayama said, giving his simple impression.

“It’s more beautiful than ‘one ray of light,’” I said.

The two of us smoked together. We stayed there, mostly in silence, until that light was gone. We didn't want to speak. In life, one encounters situations when it's best not to talk. This was one of those situations.

After that, we decided to go home.

Kayama had come on his bicycle, so we decided to home on it together.

“Please make a lot of friends. In the end, I didn't have anyone I could call a close friend. I wanted friends. Please make a lot of friends in my place, Takuya-kun.”

My house was pretty far from Kayama's. Despite that, Kayama took me quite close to my house. I thanked him and got off the bicycle.

“Later,” Kayama said briefly, and then he did a U-turn and rode into the distance. That was the kind of guy he was.

As I was thinking that, Kayama suddenly turned around. It was probably the first time that Kayama had turned around as we parted ways. I instinctively

prepared myself for something. But Kayama didn't say anything else. I thought that maybe he was trying to say something but was unable to say it.

"Hey, Kayama!" I shouted, having become impatient.

What was there to say after making the effort of being dozens of meters apart? What was it that couldn't be said at a normal distance? I thought about this, and then I said, "We're friends, right?"

Kayama looked at me expressionlessly. His eyes looked like they were glaring at me. "Of course we are," he said. "Don't ask embarrassing stuff like that!" he added after a short silence.

Kayama laughed and started pedaling his bicycle again. He was standing up on the bike as he pedaled.

He didn't turn around again.

"Come to think of it, is Kamenosuke doing well? Make sure to feed him properly. Let him live a long life. Please give him your love and spoil him."

I'd recently come to realize that Kamenosuke was quite the delinquent.

He frequently ran away.

He'd somehow crawl out of his water tank without me knowing it and walk around all kinds of places inside the house. Every time it happened, my mother and I made a huge fuss about finding him. He was particularly fond of the bathroom.

“I wonder if he wants to go back to the ocean,” my mother said, as if the idea had just suddenly occurred to her.

“There was a person who said something similar,” I said.

“Should I get the car?” my mother suggested, voicing another one of her ideas.

In the end, I agreed to her suggestion, and the two of us plus one turtle went out to the garage.

“It’s been a while since the two of us went out, hasn’t it? Maybe we haven’t done this since Meiko died,” my mother said.

“Well, it’s unusual to go out with your mother when you’re at my age.”

It was still winter, so it was cold, though. But the sky was clear. We arrived at the same beach that I’d once come to. There weren’t that many beaches nearby, so it couldn’t be helped.

My mother had brought a beach mat. She put it on top of the sand, and we sat on it. And then we took Kamenosuke out of his tank and let him out onto the

sandy beach. He started walking away with calm footsteps. He looked kind of energetic.

“Takuya, you attended a classmate’s funeral a little while back, didn’t you?” my mother asked.

“Yeah.”

I still hadn’t told my mother about Mamizu in detail. It was partially because I was embarrassed, but it was also because it would be difficult to put all of the events in order and tell her properly.

“Was it someone you knew?”

“... Yeah.”

“I see.”

My mother didn’t ask anything else. That was a little unexpected.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Hmm?”

“You know, I really loved Meiko,” I said.

My mother looked at me, smiling. “I know,” she said quietly.

“I’m not a cold person.” I felt like my voice would start shaking. I desperately tried to stop that from happening.

But it was impossible.

It was strange.

Tears came out and wouldn't stop.

I didn't know why I had been unable to cry at the appropriate time, and then ended up crying at a completely unrelated moment instead.

“I know, Takuya,” my mother said, stroking my head.

I stayed there, letting her comfort me.

After that, my mother suddenly stood up and put her hands near her mouth. She put her hands into the shape of a megaphone and let out a shout without warning.

I couldn't help but be surprised. It wasn't just me; Kamenosuke, who had been walking towards the sea, turned around in surprise.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It's nothing.”

Only the sound of the waves could be heard. I could only smell the scent of the wet sand.

“Shall we go home?” my mother said first.

I looked at Kamenosuke, who was continuing his small footsteps, becoming wet from the sea water. “Should we leave Kamenosuke here?” I suggested.

“Takuya. Don't say such silly things.”

“I was kidding.”

We retrieved Kamenosuke and got in the car.

“Stop by the hardware store on the way,” I requested my mother on the way home.

“What for?” she asked.

“I’m thinking of helping Kamenosuke getting a girlfriend,” I said, looking at the water tank behind me.

Kamenosuke was staring at me curiously.

“I want to get married, and if possible, have three children. I want girls, but I think boys are cute as well. I don’t mind if it’s small, but I want a single-family home with a garden. But they say that home is where you make it, so I think I would actually be happy with anything.

“I never thought about these things up until now. I mean, that’s obvious, isn’t it? There’s no way that a person who wished that she was never born would think about wanting children, is there? But I think about it now.”

After a while, winter vacation ended and there was a bit of news at the start of the new year.

Yoshie-sensei had gotten married, and she would be resigning at the end of the school year.

According to the rumors, she'd found her partner through a marriage interview. She'd been going out with Kayama until just half a year ago, so I was a little surprised by how quickly it had happened.

On the other hand, it seemed that Kayama wasn't really that shocked. "He's a regular company employee. But when I saw the photo that's going around, he was so ugly that I wanted to laugh," he said.

Who passed a photo like that around? I wondered, but when I looked at the photo that Kayama sent me, I saw that the man had a shiny bald head, resembling a Nurarihyon from folklore.

One day a little while after that, when first period was Yoshie-sensei's national language class, I came into the classroom in the morning to see that someone had scribbled on the blackboard.

Yoshie-chan, congratulations on your marriage

Alongside those words was a portrait of that Nurarihyon man and a heart, drawn in chalk.

Yoshie-sensei came in, saw this and hastily started erasing it from the blackboard, looking embarrassed. "Hey, whose prank is this!" she said, but she didn't seem to wholly dislike it; she looked a little happy.

I knew that there was only one person in the class who would pull off such a stupid prank, and Yoshie-sensei probably knew this as well.

“You’re surprisingly pretty good at drawing,” I said to Kayama.

“What are you talking about?” he said, playing dumb with an expression of feigned innocence.

However, I didn’t miss the chalk dust on the sleeves of his uniform. But in the end, I let it go and pretended I hadn’t seen it.

“I had a lot of things that I wanted to do for you. I wanted to do all kinds of things for you. I only ever had you do things for me, and I wasn’t really able to do anything for you, was I, Takuya-kun? I’m sorry for being a bad girlfriend.

“But it would be nice if you could quickly find a new girlfriend. Men can’t always be dwelling on their ex-girlfriends. But still, it’s alright if you remember me from time to time as well, right?”

Just once, I saw Riko-chan-san.

On a Sunday, when I was walking near that maid café, I saw her on the footpath on the other side of the road.

Riko-chan-san was walking with a tall guy, their arms linked.

I thought about shouting and calling out to her, but I decided not to in the end.

That scene somehow looked very happy to me. Riko-chan-san had a broad smile on her face as she engaged in an animated conversation with the guy. I didn't want to break that scene.

I wanted that moment to last forever. I wished that it would. And then I felt a little jealous.

After that, I never saw Riko-chan-san again.

The 49th day went by, and half a year later, I visited Mamizu's grave.^[7] Makoto-san had invited me to go and visit the grave with him. At first, I thought I'd go and secretly visit it myself later, because I kind of felt a little embarrassed about various things.

But I felt like if I did that, I would be no different from my old self.

When the ones we love die,
we must commit suicide.

That poem, the one written by Nakahara Chuuya, actually had more lines following that.

Back then, I hadn't properly read it until the end, but when I'd read it again the other day, there was something else written there.

It continued like this.

But if we continue on,
beyond redemption,
let us shake hands in good rhythm.

I wondered what the poem meant for a while. And then I realized that there wasn't enough meaning in it for me to think that deeply about it. It probably meant that the people who live on should get along with other people who live on.

In any case, under those circumstances, I invited Kayama and went to the front of the station where we'd agreed to meet. Things had been arranged so that Makoto-san would come and pick us up there.

“What on earth is that?” Kayama asked in surprise as he saw me.

I had brought Kamenosuke and his lover in a bucket that was filled with a little water. Incidentally, I hadn't given the second turtle a name yet. But I was planning to properly give her one soon.

“Well, I thought I'd bring these turtles,” I said.

“I don't think normal humans take turtles with them when they go to visit graves.”

As we were having this conversation, Makoto-san's car arrived.

“It's been a while,” he said.

Apparently, Makoto-san had changed jobs now. He was working in sales, and the air about him had changed a little. He had begun to dress somewhat smarter, too. He didn't look particularly surprised to see Kamenosuke and the other turtle.

“It's been a while, hasn't it, Takuya-kun?” said Ritsu-san, who was sitting in the passenger seat. She and Makoto-san hadn't put themselves back on the

family register, but they seemed to be meeting more frequently than they had in the past.

Come to think of it, this is the first time Ritsu-san has called me by my name, I thought.

“Have you been doing well?” Makoto-san asked, starting a conversation like a father who was seeing his sons for the first time in a long time.

“I’ve started skateboarding recently,” replied Kayama, who was sitting in the back seat with me.

He’d actually started skateboarding, and he had numerous small injuries and grazes from falling over. I had no idea what was so fun about it, so I hadn’t felt like joining him, but I didn’t have any negative feelings about seeing Kayama do something earnestly for once.

Hearing this, Makoto-san engaged in conversation with Kayama and laughed, seeming to enjoy himself.

“Takuya-kun, haven’t you started doing anything?” Makoto-san asked me.

“I’m going to start something as well,” I said.

I didn’t know what that would be, but I thought that it had been long enough for me to be able to start something. If I dragged my feet too long, Mamizu would be disappointed. No, rather than being disappointed, she’d feel bored and restless. That’s what I thought.

Now that I thought about it, there were still several things in Mamizu’s notebook that I hadn’t done yet. I’d looked back at it the other day and

laughed at the one that said, “I want to touch my chin with my elbow before I die.”

“Hey, Kayama, can you touch your chin with your elbow?” I asked.

“... Isn’t that impossible?” Kayama tried for a little while, and then quickly gave up.

Makoto-san tried to join in while driving, so we hastily stopped him, though. It was surprisingly difficult; it seemed possible, and yet, it was impossible. It was possible that this was a more difficult problem than the Poincaré conjecture.

“Come to think of it, I was thinking of naming the new turtle I bought. Do you have any good ideas?” I asked nobody in particular.

“Sakura,” Makoto-san said, looking outside his window at the cherry blossoms that hadn’t bloomed yet.

“Could it be that when you named Mamizu...” I had a bad feeling as I began to ask my question.

“Of course, I was drinking water. I was hungover, you see.”

“So, what if you were drinking tea at the time instead?” Kayama asked unnecessarily.

“If it was green tea, then I’d probably have named her ‘Midori,’ ” Makoto-san said.

“You’re the worst,” I said, letting out a little laughter.^[8]

“Takuya-kun, haven’t you become somewhat more cheerful?” Makoto-san said, looking at my expression through the back mirror.

“I’m shaking hands in good rhythm,” I said.

Makoto-san looked puzzled. I couldn’t blame him.

And then there was an idiot whistling and holding his hand out towards me. It was Kayama, of course.

“It helps me out that you’re an idiot,” I said as I shook his hand.

The graveyard was about twenty minutes away by car. It was a spacious graveyard facing a crowded temple that was something of a sightseeing spot.

“Wow, it’s so shiny. It feels brand new,” Kayama said as he saw Mamizu’s grave, giving his idiotic impression of it.

Makoto-san laughed, and I looked at him and noticed that he was wearing a muffler now. He’d probably put it on when we got out of the car. It was the muffler that Mamizu had knitted.

“You’re wearing a muffler even though it’s spring,” I said.

Makoto-san gave an embarrassed smile. It was still only the end of March, so it was a little chilly, but Makoto-san was the only person wearing a muffler. Well, I was probably the only guy holding turtles, too.

I took out the snow globe that I’d finally completed recently from my pocket, and placed it beside Mamizu’s grave.

Inside the snow globe, there were two people standing close together, wearing a wedding dress and a tuxedo. It was like time had stopped inside it.

And then the four of us put our hands together and closed our eyes in front of the grave.

Soon, spring would come.

The season in which I'd first met Mamizu.

But I didn't want to die.

I was even looking forward to seeing the cherry blossoms bloom.

I took the voice recorder from my pocket and pushed the earphones into my ears.

I closed my eyes and listened one more time to Mamizu's voice, saying the words that I'd listened to over and over.

“My father was calling you on the phone. I’m sure that my final moment is coming soon. This is my real, genuine, final request.

“I love happiness. I’m so scared of dying that I can’t help myself; I’m so terrified that I feel like my heart will stop out of fear. But I’m not scared anymore. I’m happy.

“What about you, Takuya-kun? Please do your best to become happy for my sake. I am praying for your happiness from the bottom of my heart.

“This will be the final communication from Watarase Mamizu.

“Goodbye. I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Mamizu’s grave didn’t have ‘無’ written on it like Shizusawa Sou’s.

It simply read,

Watarase Mamizu

It’s fine that way, I thought.

AFTERWORD

Hello everyone. This is my debut work.

Thank you very much for reading it.

The characters in this novel may appear to be a little strange.

The way the protagonist Takuya lives his life is somewhat reckless, and Kayama seems to be living in a simple, hedonistic way, so they are both quite distorted. The other characters are all a little strange, too.

But to me, they do not seem all that strange. It is not that they are deliberately living their lives in strange ways. They are desperately living as best as they can in their own ways, and as a result, they shoulder the burdens of life.

In my teenage years, I felt the burdens of life as they did.

I felt like I had nowhere to go, but I was saved by novels. That was why, before I knew it, I had naturally started to write novels myself. I thought that I wanted to become a novelist, but at the same time, I thought that it might be impossible.

In the end, I graduated university and found employment. Cornered by my work, my motivation to write novels gradually disappeared.

“There’s no way I can become a novelist.”

That was my favorite phrase.

I had a friend who told me, “You definitely can. So be one.” They read the things I wrote with interest. I was working at my company on the night that friend committed suicide.

Ever since then, like the protagonist of this novel, I felt guilty about living. And in truth, for the longest time, I could never understand what my friend who died had been thinking.

Unable to sleep, I often went out for walks at night. I continued walking for hours and hours, and on one such walk, when it became morning, I decided to write novels.

And so, I quit my job and began writing novels.

This world is full of unreasonable, painful, and cruel things.

I think that it is a very natural thing to start wanting to die.

I wanted to write a novel that would make its readers want to live on despite that.

If my work made someone feel this way, even a little, that would make me extremely happy.

Now that I have become a novelist, when I look back, I realize that the words of my late friend were right. I do not know what Takuya will do from this point on, but I want him and every person in the world who shoulders all of the difficulties that life brings to do their best.

It's all right. You can definitely do it.

I received the help of many people for the release of this book. Loundraw-sama, who drew images that far surpassed what I, the author, had imagined. When I first saw the illustrations, I whispered, "Wow," feeling moved. Also, Yamaguchi Kouzaburou-sama, Ayasaki Shun-sama, Aoi Blue-sama, who

provided me with wonderful recommendations and comments. From all of these people that I admire, I received words that I felt were almost wasted on me. The editors in charge, Yuzawa-sama and Endou-sama. They identified suitable directions for an unskillful author and his unskillful work to take. I truly thank everyone, including those whose names I have not mentioned here. In my teenage years, I would never have imagined that a work that I started writing myself would receive help from so many people and make it out into the world.

There may be some poorly-written parts, but I put everything I have possessed up until now into this novel.

‘I will write everything I can write right now into the work in front of me.’ I always think this, and within three days of finishing writing, I begin wanting to write again. I always feel like there are things that I haven’t written about.

That is why I will continue to write novels until I die.

I hope to see you again in my next novel.

Sano Tetsuya

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. This chapter title is the English caption written next to the Japanese chapter title, which actually translates to: “The season of cherry blossoms and the temperature of linoleum.” [\[↑\]](#)
2. A butsudan is a small, household Buddhist altar. [\[↑\]](#)
3. Nakahara Chuuya was a famous Japanese poet who lived 1907-1937; this is part of a real poem. [\[↑\]](#)
4.
 - Natsume Souseki was a famous Japanese novelist whose portrait appeared on the 1,000 yen note. He is considered the greatest writer in modern Japanese history. He studied in London and vomited blood due to a stomach ulcer (which he later died of) at Shuzen Temple.
 - “Kame” means turtle, while “nosuke” is a common ending to a Japanese (male, if I’m not mistaken) name. [\[↑\]](#)
5. This kanji is pronounced “mu” and roughly translates to things like ‘nothing,’ ‘nothingness,’ ‘empty,’ etc; the translation in English differs depending on the context. But this kanji and its meaning becomes a

common theme throughout the story, so these translated words will be marked with [無]. [↑]

6. 誕 (tan) is the first kanji in 誕生日 (tanjoubi, meaning birthday). It's actually not that difficult a kanji, but it does have a lot of strokes, so it seems that Takuya forgot how to write it. Writing "happy birthday" in hiragana would be お誕生日おめでとう, which is a lot of characters. [↑]
7. There is a Buddhist service held 49 days after someone's death. [↑]
8. 桜 (sakura) is Japanese for 'cherry blossom.' The みず (mizu) in Mamizu's name means 'water.' みどり (midori) means 'green.' [↑]